12-19-2008

Wholly Innocent

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

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B.A. Saint Louis University, 1998

December, 2008

Acknowledgements

I thank my parents, Bill and Amelie Harris, without whom the central subject of this thesis, my life, would not exist. I especially thank Mom for endowing me with a vivid imagination, and Dad a steady work ethic. I am eternally grateful for my wife Nicole's undying support and unflinching editorial advice. In addition to keeping me well-fed, happy, and relatively sane, she has helped me slosh through difficult emotional terrain and make labyrinthine events clear to the reader.

While there are literally hundreds of other family members who have impacted this manuscript in various ways, and I am obliged to each one for making me who I am, I would like to single out my brother Peter, whose tireless dedication to music has inspired me to embark on this artistic quest. I also thank: my brother Billy, whose prodigious talents and intelligence have helped to guide me on this path; my sister Lucy, for seeing the gold amidst the unrefined ore; my brother-in-law Woody, an inspiring and energetic writer, who spent countless hours reviewing early versions of this manuscript and ultimately guided me in the right direction; my Aunt Sara, for asking direct questions and assisting with family history; my Uncle Steve, for reminding me that play and work are one and the same; my late Uncle Louis Burton, for sharing the magic of our family lore; my cousin Heather, for introducing me to Nicole and driving me home from the Jesuits; and my Aunt Ginger, for revealing that every moment of life is a teacher.

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the University of New Orleans Low Residency MFA program, which has helped me shape this record of events into a literary manuscript. I'm grateful to Bill Lavender, for his cool leadership of this artistic enterprise, and his wife Nancy Dixon for introducing me to some key literary figures. Jennifer Stewart deserves special thanks for standing behind the banner of this project even when I had given up on it. Jennifer has also

been responsible for keeping me enrolled in the program and encouraging me to dedicate two full summers to the literary life. Dinty Moore initiated the first broad structural questions leading to the manuscripts current form, and his early supervision continues to guide my conception of the manuscript as a literary work. Jim Grimsley's indispensable guidance forced me to adhere to logic, which allowed linear structure to drop out and make room for real scenes. Joseph Boyden, in addition to believing in the project, helped me make crucial adjustments in tone and repair myriad grammatical errors. Steven Church helped to clarify one of the most difficult parts of the book, the ending.

Finally, I am grateful to Iñigo de Loyola, his Compañia and its associates, and to the mysterious divine forces who have blessed me with this spiritual journey of faith and healing. May we all continue to grow in awareness.

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Abstract

Why would a relatively normal eighteen year-old boy from New Orleans decide to dedicate his life to God as a Jesuit priest at the tail-end of the twentieth century? What obstacles would he meet along the way? What would sustain him in religious life? Why would he leave after seven years? Can one be sexually and emotionally healthy as a celibate? Is celibacy different for homosexuals than it is for heterosexuals? What is essential in the spiritual life?

Key words: Iñigo de Loyola, Jesuit, priest, chastity, sex, meditation, love, spirit, peace, obedience, frustration, gay, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Indian Reservation, St. Louis, Omaha, New Orleans, Catholic Church

Introduction

I left my family at age eighteen to join the Jesuits, an order of Roman Catholic priests. The Jesuits, though numbering only eighteen thousand men worldwide, wield tremendous influence over one-sixth of the world's population. Most Catholics will never enter a priestly community in their lifetimes, due to religious communities' cloistered and secretive nature. I lived and worked within priestly communities for seven years.

When I joined the Jesuits, I didn't know that religion could be an elaborate mask for deep psychological wounds. The spiritual awakening I experienced at age seventeen led me into religious life seeking answers, but the emotional and intellectual work that encompassed my seven years in the priesthood left me with mostly questions. I did learn that the Catholic Church, though a force for much good in the world, also harbored a significant number of sexual predators. I also learned that, in order to be a healthy emotional human being, I had no choice but to leave the priesthood in search of a loving, monogamous relationship.

As a Jesuit I strove to imitate the life of Iñigo de Loyola, a Basque courtier turned pilgrim saint at the height of the Spanish Empire. I was fortunate to meet spiritual guides along the way who helped me learn Iñigo's *Spiritual Exercises*, but in the end I discovered that my spiritual path diverged from the one Iñigo pioneered. Nonetheless, by leaving the Jesuits and entering a life of poverty and radical solitude, I found that I was more in tune with the life if Iñigo outside of religious life than I had been inside of it.

Chapter One

1993. Sister Miranda's Convent. Omaha, Nebraska. Sister Miranda and I walk down a long hall to the chapel, where we sit next to each other in the front pew and stare up past the altar at a sky of painted stars against a violet background. Below the stars, Mary floats up to heaven, waving to the crowd of Apostles back on the ground. The darkness, the silence, the candlelight flickering before statues. I thank God for Sister Miranda guiding me through the loneliness of religious life, and ask for the grace to live my vows, which I took publicly, along with four classmates, in a chapel in Grand Coteau, Louisiana just two months ago. I am 20 years old, just beginning the two-year humanities program at Creighton University, in Omaha, Nebraska, before moving on to philosophy studies in St. Louis.

I feel the warmth of Sister Miranda's body in the pew next to me, and though I fight my feelings, I am aroused. I close my eyes, hoping it will help me focus on God's presence, but my arousal grows when I feel Sister Miranda's warm fingers lightly stroking the top of my hand.

"Oh, God, please," I pray. "Please help me do what's right."

Nothing in my vows prevents us from holding hands. The articles we read in novitiate agree that chastity is ultimately about the spirit of the law, not the letter. Nonetheless, a definite line has to be drawn, and the consensus in articles and discussions about chastity is: no genital contact.

I open my eyes and stare at Mary rising into heaven and turn my hand over, inviting Sister Miranda to place hers in mine. Our fingers interlacing, we stare straight ahead. I keep my sensual energy focused on God, but when I feel her head on my shoulder, all I can think about is sex.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea," I say.

"Why not?" she says. "Aren't we giving glory to God just by being here together? I spend three hours every day in prayer, and God fills me with light so I can bring it to the homeless. Now you and I are sharing that light together."

I glance at her, avoiding her blue eyes, shining like sunlit pools against the dark pottery of her skin, but I am weak, and soon I am staring into them. The way her stylish white blouse falls against her figure is far from the typical nun. She is still in great shape at age 50.

She kisses me on the cheek.

"That felt good," I say.

She kisses me again, longer this time, and I feel her tongue caressing my skin.

"Maybe we should go somewhere else," I say. "The other sisters might get the wrong idea."

"I know where we can go," she says, and leads me out a side door of the chapel.

We are soon walking through the darkness behind the convent, and as we walk, at a slow and deliberate pace, I tell Sister Miranda about my loneliness.

"Is everyone in Omaha mute?" I ask. "I'm doing my best to meet other students, but none of them talk. And the cooks here don't understand that throwing a few spices and some salt in a dish won't kill it. I miss Louisiana. I miss my people."

"You need a good massage," she says. "A little human touch."

"Massage?"

"Part of taking care of your soul is caring for your body. And you need to have fun. Come to my Halloween party next week. It's at my apartment."

"Apartment?"

She points at what looks like a groundskeeper's house, and explains that the sisters have given her special permission to live and hold gatherings there. The idea of a nun with an apartment strikes me as a bit contrary to the whole idea of commonality and simplicity, but maybe Miranda's exceptional work requires additional resources. Maybe her sisters recognize that.

We re-enter the convent, this time through a door on the opposite side of the chapel.

"This is our spirituality center," she says. "I reserved it for us tonight."

"Really?" I say.

"We have the whole wing to ourselves," she says. "It's just you and me."

She smiles seductively, putting her hand in mine, leading me to a dark room, empty except for a massage table and a lamp. She turns on the lamp and tells me to take off my shirt. My sense of her as a safe haven, as someone with whom I can share my sexual feelings without fear of anything happening, begins to fade. I justify staying.

"*Massage is very beneficial for a person's overall well-being*," I think. "*Spiritual as well as physical*."

"Are you a virgin?" I ask.

"Yes," she says.

"So, you wouldn't ever want to have sex, would you? I mean, you've come this far as a virgin… you'd want to die as a virgin. Wouldn't you?"

"I think God would understand if I had sex," she says. "It would be wonderful."

Every muscle in my body tightens.

"I…think I'll leave my shirt on," I say, laying stomach-first on the massage table.

Chapter Two

1994. Country Road. Guatemalan Highlands. Fog wafts in from the thick jungle, refreshing the cool wind that blows through my hair. I hang on tight to the edge of the pick-up, squeezed in with Michael Bouzigard and ten Maya Quiché men in brightly colored traditional shirts, white cowboy hats and blue jeans sitting silently around me. Sometimes the engine in the blue Toyota pick-up labors so strenuously, bouncing along the uneven cobblestone, pot-holed mountain roads, it feels like we will have to get out and push it. But it chugs on, its whine echoing through the dense foliage. It labors past the occasional shack hanging over the mountainside like an eagle's nest, its indigenous inhabitants staring out at us like still photographs. Their stony faces speak of 500 years of resistance to the Spanish conquest, like the stellae their ancestors etched in magnificent temples, buried in the jungles further north.

We pass through empty little towns, where black graffiti on white walls boldly proclaims "Viva URGN," open support for the country's four guerilla groups, united in the fight against the national army still kidnapping, torturing and massacring indigenous people. High above us, barely visible, Mayan farmers dig into the earth with scythes, planting maize and beans on neatly terraced plots of land kept in place with stones laid out by hand, as they have for centuries.

On the timeline of this ancient civilization that peaked when the Spanish nearly lost everything to the advancing Moors at the end of the first millennium, my 21 years are insignificant. Even in contrast to Michael Bouzigard's 28 years, his long beard and balding head, his master's in economics from Duke and his quiet, careful way of being, I am young. My face is clean-shaven and youthful. I am curious and impulsive. I joined the Jesuits out of high school, and have completed only one year of college, at Creighton University in Omaha, which now feels so pleasantly far away.

"You think they'd torture us first, or just shoot us in the back of the head, like the Jesuits in El Salvador?" I say to Michael as the pick-up winds along a narrow mountain pass, the land dropping off to gullies one thousand feet below us.

"They'd probably leave me alone," he says dryly. "You, I don't know."

"Tony Corcoran says we're safer because we're Americans. They kill us, they have to answer to their sponsors."

"The Maryknoll nuns were Americans," he says, gazing out at the landscape.

"There's never been a Maryknoll nun in Congress."

"Drinan shouldn't have stayed in Congress as long as he did. Jesuits should never be that political."

"Regardless, it gives us influence. And Clinton went to Georgetown, has Jesuit friends."

"True," he says.

"But you never know. They know how to make people disappear."

Hours later, we chug up the final rise in the cobblestone road, onto a broad plaza bustling with activity, near a colonial church. The men in the truck nod to us.

"Santa Maria Chiquimula?" we ask.

They nod again. We get out and pay the driver a few Quetzales and approach a group of Quiché men welding together a protective iron grate around giant stone planters that hold saplings bursting with bright green buds. We ask them, in Spanish, for the Jesuit residence. They point us to a small house several yards away, then casually resume the buzz of the electric blue arc, melting down the metals, the bright orange sparks racing to the ground, bouncing and burning out.

In the back room of the residence, a priest works with a local Mayan scholar to translate the Bible from Spanish into Quiché, the most widely spoken of 22 Mayan dialects used by over 40 percent of the Guatemalan population. They play through their Herculean task of translation, acting out words when their meanings are in doubt. When the Quiché scholar frowns, disappointed that the word *Virgen* doesn't translate into Quiché, the priest references the original Hebrew meaning.

"Ah," the scholar says in Spanish. "*Jovensita* (young girl). *Claro*."

They welcome us warmly, teaching us Quiché words for pick-up (*chi-ich*) and the moon (*ik)*. They laugh, hearing Americans speak their language, the language they have been forced to abandon in public, the language that is forbidden in schools. The Jesuits devote years to learning this ancient tongue themselves, spending months at a time in remote areas living with families, transliterating it into Spanish, and writing dictionaries.

Up the hill, at a brand new school built by Quiché men who walk miles of steep mountain paths to the parish center to learn the arts of carpentry, ironwork and welding at the parish hall, young students absorb the language and history of their own people. They acquire Quiché grammar and vocabulary and read the *Popul Vuh*, the Mayan book of time, the only text to survive the Spanish burning of Mayan manuscripts as part of the conquest. They are also armed with Spanish, the language of the *colegios* and universities, the language of the courts in which their land is taken from beneath their feet.

At the new social center, adults learn basic reading, economics, history and mathematics. They study scripture and practice public speaking, so they can become *catequistas*, teachers of the gospel, in their own villages. Women master basic health, hygiene, and traditional Quiché cuisine. Everyone pitches in for a massive ecological campaign, planting over a hundred

thousand new saplings to recover thousands of miles of land de-forested by desperate villagers foraging for firewood and clearing land for crops.

The Army sends helicopters with flame-throwers to burn the forests, afraid that the guerillas are hiding and training there. With Jesuits nearby, the Army is certain there is some sort of revolution happening. They are right. There is a revolution happening at the church, but unlike the army's brutal, destructive tactics, it is peaceful and intelligent, and I fall in love with it. When Michael Bouzigard returns to Quetzaltenango after the weekend at Santa Maria Chiquimula, I don't want to leave.

"This is why I joined in the first place," I say. "It's like the Reductions."

"I love it here too," Michael says, "But we're here to study Spanish. That's our mission."

"I know, but if we studied up here we could learn Quiché, too. We could actually be useful while we learn both languages."

"Quiché would only be useful if you spent your life here."

"I would love that," I say, already picturing myself at the ripe old age of 50, having defied my American superiors as a youth and switched to the Central American province, where living the vows means risking one's life and not just improving the status quo.

"All right," Michael says. "Just be careful. And promise me you'll come back in a few days?"

"I'll be there," I say, knowing that in the spirit of obedience, which I vowed only one year ago, I have no choice but to go back.

Even as I hug Michael, patting him hard on the back so he doesn't mistake my affection for anything other than brotherliness, and watch him walk to the blue Toyota pick-up that will

carry him back to Quetzaltenango, my imagination takes me back in time to the Jesuit Reductions.

1631. Paraña River. Paraguay. Barefoot, in a threadbare black cassock, stepping to the rhythm of native flutes and drums, I walk next to Father Antonio Ruiz de Montoya, an energetic young Peruvian Jesuit who, like me, spent many a colonial night partying until the dawn hours before awakening to the joy of serving others and fighting injustice. For four days, we have journeyed through the jungles of Paraguay. Behind us, fifteen thousand Guaraní women, men and children carry sacks of maize, infants, bows, arrows and musical instruments.

One too many times in the past five years, the Portuguese bandeirantes, have raided the ornate Baroque cities we helped the Guaraní build with their own hands. Though we poured our hearts and souls into those cities we call Reductions, we have to abandon them, find a safer place further north where we can start again. Of their own volition, carving rock and stone in the latest Baroque designs, taught by our Swiss and Irish Jesuit companions, our talented Guaraní followers have dazzled us with their skill and perseverance. Seeing the Guaraní carve violins worthy of the symphonies in Lisbon and Rome, and hearing them so quickly learn to play Baroque symphonies for the laborers in the fields the town owns in common, has changed me forever. We cannot let them be carried off to slavery in the plantations, where they are beaten and forced to work themselves literally to death. We will protect them with our own lives, if need be, but I pray to God we can avoid it.

We stop at the Paraña River, where these master carvers build boats that will take us two hundred miles further north, where we will climb the indomitable Iguazu Falls and lose the Portuguese slave traders for good. Here, leaning against a stack of rocks, I watch Antonio labor

over his opus of passion, the Guaraní grammar. He sounds out the words, transliterating them to Spanish so prospective missionaries in Europe can learn the language before they make the treacherous journey across the Atlantic. Though in a hundred years, these missions will be attacked and destroyed by Spanish and Portuguese forces bent on controlling our missions that are so profitable, and our future Jesuit brothers will be arrested and expelled from the Americas, Antonio's work will endure. One day Guaraní will be the national language of Paraguay, a testament to the heroic love, however imperfect and paternalistic, we have for these magnificent people.

1994. Santa Maria Chiquimula. Guatemalan Highlands. The goose bumps I give myself, imagining those heroic Jesuits in the Reductions, slowly recede. Over warm, handmade tortillas, rice and beans and vegetables grown from a nearby garden, I sit around a simple wooden table with the three Jesuits who run the parish, trying to pick up as much of the lightning-fast Spanish conversation as I can. Chema, the tall, lanky provincial visiting from Central American province headquarters in Panama, keeps the conversation light with jokes, and leans over occasionally, translating in a low voice when he sees I am completely lost.

"Whether Sartre was right about dialectical reasoning doesn't matter so much when your belly is empty, you see?" he says.

"Ah, yes. Now I get it." I say.

That night, the provincial invites me for a walk, along with Eduardo, the taciturn, middle-aged Mexican pastor who has dedicated his entire priestly life to the Quiché people. Eduardo periodically travels to the remotest areas of the parish to re-immerse himself in the language and culture, pushing himself to learn even the most technical agricultural terms. During the two

nights I have spent at the parish, I have attended two candlelit Masses given by Eduardo, each packed with men and women in full, traditional *traje,* each pattern reflecting the wearer's village. Though I understood none of Eduardo's words, I felt the people's complete attention riveted on him throughout his brief, passionate sermon.

Eduardo is constantly on the move, visiting the sick and dying, connecting people who need to repair their houses with people who can, and building his educational programs. The other Jesuits speak very highly of him, and I feel lucky when Chema invites me on the walk with him and Eduardo. We set out on foot into the dirt streets of town in the pitch-black night, and I don't know where we are going. Is Eduardo secretly meeting the guerillas? What if the Army stops us? Chema, in charge of nearly 150 Jesuits across Central America who regularly receive death threats for teaching the poor to read and write and understand their rights, doesn't seem too worried.

He teases Eduardo relentlessly.

"*Ah, los artistas de la compañia que sufren tanto*."

"¿*Que sufren*?" I ask.

"Poor Eduardo. After spending three years studying the arts in France he is censored by his own general."

"What did he do?" I ask.

"Have you visited the university in San Salvador?"

"Not yet," I say, "But we're hoping to go when our program is finished."

Later that summer, we will visit the Jesuit residence where, four years earlier, six Jesuits and their housekeepers were shot in the back of the head for teaching theology and economics.

We will stand in the same grass where the soldiers sat, drinking beer, for several hours after their crime.

1989. University of Central America. San Salvador, El Salvador. A few days before they kill the priests, the soldiers force their way into the Jesuit residence. They search through books and papers, seeking communist texts, anything they can use to justify what they have been ordered to do. The soldiers are mostly illiterate. The ones who can read are unqualified to judge the scholarly texts they find.

Father Ignacio Martin-Baro is an intense little man. He serves as academic vice president of the university, director of the psychology department, and editor of a scholarly journal on Central American studies. Worried, he calls his friend Charlie Beirne, academic vice president at Santa Clara University. Nacho and Charlie both earned their Phds in economics from the University of Chicago and worked together on several projects in the 1980s.

"Nacho, what's up?" Charlie asks.

"There's a lot happening. We need to get this to the American press."

"Whatever I can do," Charlie says, sensing the tension in Nacho's voice.

The Army has imposed a curfew on the city in efforts to slow down the Salvadoran Rebels, who are moving freely through the capital. Soldiers cordon off the university, and even before they search the residence, the Jesuits sense the Army is eager to teach the Rebels a hard lesson. Nacho tells Charlie he will write up an article examining the events roiling the capital, but will need help getting it to press under an assumed name. Nacho is no revolutionary, but writing a candid article detailing the actual events taking place in El Salvador could get him killed.

Charlie is eager to help. In addition to his friendship with Nacho, Charlie has also known Father Ignacio Ellacuria, the Jesuit priest who serves as president of the University of Central America, since meeting him at a conference on Jesuit education in 1976. As associate dean of Georgetown business school in the 1980s, Charlie watched Ellacuria handle UN ambassador Jeane Kirpatrick, who spoke of corrupt El Salvadoran military leaders in glowing terms, with graceful tact. While Ellacuria never shrinks from addressing the systemic poverty and violence in El Salvador, he always does so in a constructive way. Ellacuria, like Charlie's friend Nacho, is a scholar.

Charlie goes about his daily academic life in the warm, clear sunshine at Santa Clara as usual, but hardly a moment goes by that he doesn't think of Nacho and Ellacuria. With no news from Nacho after two days, Charlie tries calling for several hours and can't get through. When he finally reaches Nacho, after hours of trying, Nacho sounds nervous.

"They're surrounding us, brother. Hundreds of soldiers. But I'm almost done my analysis, and I'll fax it out soon."

Though Charlie knows the kind of danger Nacho faces, knows too well that the Salvadoran Army has murdered priests and nuns before, he feels better having heard Nacho's voice. He rests easier that night, knowing he will help Nacho get word out before something really terrible can happen.

The next morning, Charlie learns that his friends have been murdered overnight. Devastated, he writes out their names: Father Ignacio "Nacho" Martin-Baro. Father Ignacio Ellacuria, Father Joaquin López y López, Father Amando López, Father Segundo Montes, and Father Juan Ramón Moreno. Their housekeeper, Julia Elba Ramos, and the housekeeper's daughter, 15-year-old Celina Mariset Ramos have also been killed. These men and their

housekeeper, these friends whom Charlie loved and admired, are gone. Senselessly, brutally murdered in cold blood.

Out of hundreds of qualified Jesuit priests from around the world who volunteer to take Nacho's place as academic vice president at the University of Central America, Charlie Beirne is selected.

1994. University of Central America. San Salvador, El Salvador. Charlie shows us the office from which Nacho planned to send the fax, the grass where the Jesuits were killed, and the chapel where they celebrated Mass each day. He introduces us to the other Jesuits at the university and drives us to the novitiate, where we meet other novices and scholastics, like ourselves, studying to be priests.

We notice a difference, immediately, in the lack of material comfort these young Jesuits enjoy, so unlike our communities back in the United States. The scholastics sleep on bunks in a few small rooms. Poverty isn't just a concept or spiritual idea, like it is for us. It's concrete, and seeing how they live shames us.

Jose, a Central American scholastic with whom I sit at dinner, is super friendly, and at first I chalk up his frequent pats on the chest and the shoulders to Latin culture. But as the night goes on, and his smiles turn to amorous giggles, I begin feeling uncomfortable. I ignore Jose for the rest of the night, worried that I have led him on in some kind of way.

1994. Santa Maria Chiquimula. Guatemalan Highlands. On our walk through the pitch-black night, to an unknown destination, Chema continues his story about Eduardo.

"So, Eduardo paints a beautiful mural depicting the martyrdom of his brothers who were gunned down in cold blood, and this mural shows the *campesinos* they stood up for. One of them wields a scythe, about to take off a soldier's head. This is behind the altar, where we remember the peaceful sacrifice Jesus made for us. The General comes to visit, and he's got the conservative Cardinals up in arms, worried that our guys are carrying guns and raising an army. He sees the scythe, and says: 'Isn't that a little violent? I'm not sure the Pope would approve.' So poor Eduardo has to go and erase the scythe. Oh, terrible day, when the artists of the Society are once again censored."

Chema laughs, and I wonder if Eduardo is getting pissed. If he is, it doesn't seem to bother Chema, who continues with the Eduardo stories.

"Did I tell you that our pastor here once got married?"

"Before he entered the Society?"

"Oh no," he says. "He was already a priest."

"Couldn't he get kicked out of the Church for that?" I ask.

"Oh yes!" Chema goes on gleefully.

"But he married a great woman – a political leader, when he was still in Chiapas, Mexico. The Guatemalan Army wanted to kill her, so this kind man helped her escape by marrying her and making her a Mexican citizen. Did I tell you Eduardo is from a wealthy Mexican family? The man has connections."

"Married her. You mean, he was the priest in her wedding service?"

"Oh no. He was the groom!"

I try to wrap my mind around this provincial's glee in the face of such danger, and obvious disobedience. I remember two years earlier, in early August of 1993, smelling the old

brick walls and the hint of incense in the novitiate chapel in Grand Coteau, Louisiana. Our novice master's voice shook with authority, pointing to the sky to emphasize that God himself demands obedience, the day before we took perpetual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience: "Under no circumstances can a Jesuit get married in civil courts, even if it's to help someone. It is grounds for expulsion from the Society, no matter how noble the goal." We five novices looked around at each other, mirthful smiles on our faces at the novice master's enigmatic ranting over an obscure point that we were pretty sure we would never face. But we would never forget it.

"Who did Eduardo marry?" I ask.

"Rigoberta Menchú," Chema says. "A Nobel prize winner. He has a very selective taste in women."

I recognize the name instantly, understanding why our novice master showed so much emotion with this point. He had to teach us the rules of the Society, but were he in the same situation as Eduardo, wouldn't he have married, too? Our professors at Pop Wuj, the language school Michael Bouzigard and a handful of other gringo Jesuits attend in Quetzaltenango, give lectures and hand out pamphlets telling Rigoberta Menchú's personal story. Her book, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, details growing up in a Mayan village and watching innocent family members brutally killed by the Guatemalan Army.

The walk with the provincial and the pastor ends at a wooden shack with a dirt floor where a poor indigenous woman is laid out in a coffin and visitors pray the rosary in Maya Quiché. The people give us a warm drink made from maize and brown sugar, and I am moved by their generosity. I hug anyone who reaches out to me, but otherwise keep my distance out of

respect. Chema hugs and kisses everyone like he has known them forever. They accept him like one of their own.

I want to stay here longer, to work alongside these heroic Jesuits who laugh in the face of death, giving all they have to the indigenous people. But I have to go back to school, to obtain the credentials. Without diplomas and degrees, I won't have the credibility the world requires to establish and manage institutions. I don't see that, and I don't care, but I know I've made a vow of obedience to my superiors, who expect my ass to be in a chair in Quetzaltenango learning the pluperfect Spanish verb form. And they expect that, in the fall, I will report to St. Louis, where I will continue my philosophy studies.

Chapter Three

1991. Airport. San Pedro Sula, Honduras. I only know we're in the middle of an emergency landing because I see the fire engines and ambulances speeding next to our plane as we cruise to the end of the runway after a long, gradual stop. Looking out past the fire engines, through the window of our SAHSA airplane ("Stay At Home, Stay Alive," Tony Corcoran joked when I made my reservations), I see a burnt-out tank and scattered columns of military vehicles. Beyond that, endless rows of dark green banana trees and palm fronds cover the hillsides.

"Is this San Pedro Sula?" I ask an American woman two rows up, whom I hear speaking Spanish fluently.

"Yeah," she says. "The hydraulics system went out, so the landing gear wasn't working. That's why we skipped Tegucigalpa, because the runways are too short up there."

Even as I step down from the plane and onto the tarmac, five hundred yards from where Tony Corcoran stands, I see his ribs protruding from beneath a worn T-shirt. He waves to me from the balcony of the tiny airport, a scruffy red beard on his normally clean-shaven face. I look up again and he is gone.

I follow the other passengers to the terminal, where camouflaged teenage soldiers holding semi-automatic rifles guard the door. Inside the terminal, soldiers check random passengers while friends and family step in, mixing with the passengers and soldiers and customs agents stamping passports. Everyone speaks in rapid-fire Spanish, and aside from the occasional "gracias," and "Dios," I can't understand a word.

A soldier barks at me in Spanish and I shrug, clueless, as he digs through my bag, an irritated look on his face. The look of irritation turns to fear as Tony, ragged and worn, towering over the teenage soldier, scolds him in fluent Spanish, pointing to me with eloquence that gives

him far more authority than the teenage soldier's rifle. The soldier bows his head, like a dog putting his tail between his legs, and zips up my bag, nodding to Tony obediently.

We step out of the terminal, my already enormous respect for Tony, a twenty-eight year old Jesuit scholastic who teaches Civics at Jesuit High School, growing by the moment. After taking a taxi into the center of town, we stow my bags on the no-frills tile floor of a hotel room, empty except for a bed, for which we will pay ten dollars that night. "I thought Brian was supposed to meet us at the airport," I say.

"Me too," Tony says. "I hope he's all right."

We contact the half of Brian's family who lives here in San Pedro Sula, worrying that Brian has either forgotten our plan to meet, or worse. It has only been three months since that spring day when Tony Corcoran, dressed in black clerics with a white collar, reprimanded Brian and I for being late to Civics class and ordered us to report for kitchen duty at lunch. We only missed the bell by seconds, but Tony, "Mister Corcoran" as we called him then, didn't give us an inch.

1990. Jesuit High School. New Orleans, Louisiana. "Mister Harris. Mister Martinez," Mister Corcoran says as we enter the classroom, moments after the bell rings. "I'll see you at 12:30 in the cafeteria. Thank you in advance for helping us keep the tables clean. I'm sure the other students will appreciate it."

Though Brian and I have gone to school together for over four years, we have never really spoken. We exchange rebellious looks as Mister Corcoran makes the class stand for prayer, and in that moment become lifelong friends. After class, Brian waits for me in the hall.

"I guarantee you I'm not washing no cafeteria tables," he says in a thick New Orleans drawl.

"I hear you brother. Bet we can talk him out of it."

We both know Mister Corcoran won't budge, but we're cocky seventeen year olds about to graduate from what is, arguably, the best high school in New Orleans, and we like the challenge. We meet outside the cafeteria minutes before the second half of lunch, when our thirty minute sentence begins. We've seen other kids scrubbing the tables, throwing away other people's trash, and we've made fun of them while Mister Corcoran stands over them, unsmiling. It's dirty work, the work of shame, and we have no intention of being humiliated by it.

"Get him to talk about something he likes," I say.

"Like what? God?"

"Something like that. The summer, I don't know. What are you doing this summer?"

"Three months in Honduras. I'll be riding around on my motorcycle, checking out the chicks."

"Sounds like a blast, dude. What if I come down at the end of the summer, right before I join the Jesuits?"

"Oh hell yeah, dude. And Corcoran's supposed to meet me, too."

Brian and I shake hands, knowing we've found our ticket out of kitchen duty. We spend the next thirty minutes planning our trip with Mister Corcoran, steering him away from the dirty cafeteria tables.

1991. Banana Highway. San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Three months later, Tony and I jump into another taxi and ride along a narrow, two-lane highway towards El Progresso, through

endless rows of banana trees once owned by the United Fruit Company. In El Progresso, Tony calls the operator and somehow finds Brian's family.

"What happened?" I ask as Tony blathers away on the phone in Spanish.

Tony puts up his hand, trying to focus on the conversation. Finally, after a few moments of laughter, he hangs up the phone.

"Apparently, our friend Brian spent the night in jail," Tony says.

Brian, his strong Mayan features accentuated by the green of the palm fronds on the mountainside behind us, mixes rum with Coke in a plastic cup, and passes it to me.

"So, I'm on this badass motorbike, I got my handlebars way up here, and I'm cruising. The cop waves at me, and he's just standing on the side of the road, so I don't really need to stop, but I do because I know I can pay him off."

"You bribed him?" I ask, incredulous.

"That's usually how it's done," he says. "But for some reason, this dipshit wouldn't take it. I start yelling at him, telling him who my Dad is, and that pisses him off."

Tony and I exchange amazed glances, picturing our friend, unusually articulate for a 17 year-old, in a language not his own, in a verbal tussle with a Honduran policeman.

"So, the guy hauls me off to jail," Brian says, sipping on his own cup of rum and Coke.

"We're just glad you're safe," Tony says, looking out at the lights of San Pedro Sula from the mountaintop where we stand, behind an enormous Coca-Cola sign that towers over the valley like the Hollywood sign does over Los Angeles.

"So, Mister Corcoran," Brian says. "How was El Salvador?"

Tony shrugs, looking down reverently as he shares some private memory with himself.

"Amazing," he says in a hushed voice. "The people of El Salvador spoiled me."

"They spoiled you?" I say. "I thought you were working with refugees."

"Yeah," he says. "It really wasn't a big deal. I was just mixing concrete and working with plumbing."

"Come on, don't be modest," I say. "It sounds like you were helping them build a new city."

"They're building on unused land owned by one of thirteen families that controls El Salvador, and it's still dangerous. The Army and the guerillas constantly harass them, trying to conscript the teenage boys in the village."

"Did they get any of them?" Brian asks, apparently familiar with this sort of practice, which also exists in Honduras.

"Thank God, no," Tony says. "Whenever we'd see them coming, we'd ring the bell in the village, and everyone would gather together with rosaries and tell them to go away."

"That's pretty ballsy," I say. "Couldn't they just mow you down?"

"The worst part is, the US is funding the Salvadoran Army, and Bush keeps covering up our involvement."

"Do you really know that?"

"The people in the village kept telling me the US Marines were down there, but I didn't believe them. Then one day I saw them, standing in the middle of a nearby field, the cocky sons of bitches, holding their M-16s like they're better than God."

"Holy shit," I say, "And Bush is really saying they're not there?"

"He was the head of the CIA before he became president. So when they see me, they drop their guns and run into the jungle. I hold up my rosary and shout: 'Look at this, you're

running from a rosary. You cowards!"

It's exactly this sort of moral authority that won my classmates and I over to Tony the previous fall. We knew every teacher in the school but did not know this Mister Corcoran, SJ, and we had no doubt we would shatter him.

1990. Jesuit High School. New Orleans, Louisiana. Mister Corcoran enters the classroom right as the bell rings and stands in front of us like an army sergeant, with his hands behind his back.

"Gentleman, please stand for prayer," he says, looking each one of us in the eyes.

We all stand up together, waiting for the right moment to prove that Mister Corcoran cannot handle us, to show him the chaotic melee a classroom can become.

"Mr. Roos, please lead us in prayer," he says.

We eye each other, surprised to hear him confront a potential leader before he has a chance to spring an offensive.

"I don't believe in prayer," Mr. Roos says.

"Okay," Mr. Corcoran says. "How about a moment of silence?"

"All right," Scott says. "I'll take a moment of silence for world peace."

Mr. Corcoran bows his head sincerely. I look down and clench my teeth to keep from laughing. I can hear a couple other kids snickering across the room.

But Mr. Corcoran, the real thing, doesn't flinch.

1991. Mountaintop. San Pedro Sula, Honduras. A year later, standing on the mountainside in Honduras, Brian orders his cousin to into town to get us another bottle of rum.

Brian, Tony Corcoran and I remember the day in Civics class when we discussed Plato's conception of the ideal city-state, one in which true justice prevails. Plato explains to his friends, Glaucon and Thrasymachus, that true justice means "to each his own." If each person does what comes naturally, everyone will be happy, Plato reasons. And if everyone is happy, they will all behave justly towards each other.

"Dude," Brian says. "Glaucon's great because he admits it. Most people will be unjust when nobody else is looking."

"I love Glaucon," I say, pouring myself the last of the rum. "When Socrates proves him wrong he doesn't whine."

"He knows what he doesn't know," Tony Corcoran says.

"Which makes him wise!" Brian says.

"Exactly," I say.

"To Glaucon," Brian says. We raise our plastic cups and drink as Brian's cousin drives up with another quart of rum. Tony Corcoran and I exchange worried glances, and while Brian takes a leak in the bushes nearby, we decide to pretend we are drinking the rum, when actually we will spill it on the ground when Brian isn't looking.

After a few days in Honduras, Tony and I move on to Belize. With Tony's encouragement, I confess the sins of my summer of debauchery to a Jesuit priest at St. John's College, cleansing my soul in preparation to become Tony's spiritual brother, a fellow Jesuit. Tony will be a rock of friendship to me, waking me up at five in the morning to power wash years of dirt and algae from the prayer paths and statues behind the novitiate in Grand Coteau, helping me forget a country girl I will fall in love with at the psychologist's office, where I will be tested for lunacy as part of my application to the Jesuits. He will inspire me to take quiet

moments to pray during province gatherings, when drinking and gossiping and badmouthing superiors threatens to drown out the nobler points of our consecrated life. He will remind me not to take religious life, philosophy studies, and my fellow Jesuits, too seriously, urging me to take time to have fun.

For Tony, nothing matters more than the fact that God became man in Jesus Christ, and through Jesus, God offers us eternal love. Though Tony loves working with the refugee service during the summers, and teaches at Jesuit High out of obedience to his superiors, his truest desire is to work in Russia. Even as we travel by speedboat to Caye Caulker in Belize, where a drunk, reefer-toking Creole takes us snorkeling on an old sailboat, Tony uses the forty-minute journey to study Russian from a worn textbook. Five years after this vacation in Belize, when Tony is ordained a priest, he will finally go to Siberia, where he will work for eleven years. I look up to Tony so much, it is tough for me to separate where his vocation ends and mine begins, because I want to be exactly like him. I want to be as strong, as principled, as faithful, as honest and as disciplined as Tony Corcoran is, and I pray to God that I will be given these graces as a Jesuit.

Chapter Four

1993. Sister Miranda's Convent. Omaha, Nebraska. "Okay, don't take off your shirt," Sister Miranda says, showing the first sign of irritation I have seen since the night we met.

Two months earlier. Creighton University. Omaha, Nebraska. The deep blue stained glass filling the lancet windows behind the altar of St. John's Church is darkened against the night sky. The faces of the choir are well-lit, like rock stars. When I see her eyes sparkling with life and her smile so filled with joy and mischief, I at first don't think she is a nun. At communion, she steps out from behind the tall priest blocking her chest, and I see the large black wooden cross around her neck, and the plain, flat shoes on her feet. As the priest says the final blessing, I see her whispering intimately with one of the priests in our studies program, and I know.

As the choir disperses after Mass, putting away their songbooks, grabbing their jackets and meeting up with friends, I step up to her and shake her hand.

"My name is Wesley," I say. "I'm a new scholastic down at Campion House. Are you a nun? I've only been here a month, and I want to meet good people."

"Are you always this forward?"

"Only when I get a gut feeling about someone."

"Are you from the South somewhere?"

"New Orleans. God I miss it."

I tell her about my family tree, a mix of French, German, English, Irish, Swedish and who knows what else, that stretches back nine generations in Louisiana.

"You eat crawdads then?"

"I'd kill for some right now."

We step into the crisp fall air as the lights of St. John's Church go out, and she doesn't seem in any hurry to get back to her convent.

"You seem like a really healthy nun," I say. "With social skills and everything. What kind of work do you do?"

"I work down at Francis house," she says.

A week later, I serve hot dogs and hamburgers to a line of homeless men and women stretching half a city block outside of Francis House, a homeless shelter in an industrial part of town. Afterwards I sit and listen to their stories. Sister Miranda, dressed in a streetwise leather coat she got for free from clothing donations, runs back and forth, counseling the staff, many of them just off the streets themselves, struggling with addictions. She introduces me to a six-foot-three ex-con in a wife beater, with tattoos all over his arms. A week later I will kneel down with him under a full moon in the park, during their staff retreat, and tell him that God loves and forgives him for killing three men in prison, that he isn't evil because God created him and everyone God creates can be redeemed. A month later, I'll visit him in his new apartment, and we'll walk down to the Jesuit community, where we'll eat scrambled eggs on a silver tray. I'll listen to him talk about how hard it is to live a normal life after spending so much time in prison.

The next weekend after the retreat, Sister Miranda and I go out to Dodge Park on the western side of town, where the Missouri River zips by on its way from Montana to the Mississippi, the freeway of the old frontier. We kick through the giant, dead dry sycamore leaves strewn about the ground, and I can't stop talking about God and sex. I think I am being a good Jesuit, seeking out spiritual conversation with a spiritual mentor, ironing out these puzzle pieces of my life that, with prayer and hard work will one day fall into order.

I have never felt more comfortable talking with anyone, and I find myself sharing my entire sexual history.

"Why are you telling me all this?" she asks, looking amused.

"I don't know," I say. "I guess because you're such a great listener."

I keep talking, telling her about the first time I ever had sex, with a girl I met at a swim meet in Texas who came to visit me during Mardi Gras when I was fifteen.

"So how did you feel about it?" she asks.

"Way better than I expected. For two nights I argued we shouldn't do it, that we should wait until we were older. Then, after the first time, I was the one asking for more."

"Why didn't you want to do it?"

"For one thing, it's a mortal sin to have pre-marital sex."

"Can't you just ask for forgiveness?"

"Yeah, but you can't do it intentionally. And I felt so self-conscious, buying condoms. The first time I used a fake ID in a bar, Dad happened to know the bartender. Dad was cool about drinking, but he and Mom would have flipped if they knew I was having sex.'"

Sister Miranda and I walk into the woods, our hands brushing together occasionally, but I'm not thinking, not even remotely, that something could happen. Nuns are the safest people in the world. They have given their lives to the Church, and God has blessed them with extraordinary graces. But until Sister Miranda, I have never met a nun with whom I am entirely comfortable. The sisters who taught me in first grade were stern and distant, and though the sisters who direct retreats in Grand Coteau are warm and accepting, they remind me of my grandmother. I can never quite let my guard down around them. But Sister Miranda is like the nuns Mom recalled from growing up, the nuns she talked about with such wonder in her eyes.

Mom's great aunts were aristocratic, French nuns of the Sacre Coeur, dressed in intricate, specially ironed cloth from forehead to toe tip. They practiced the most refined manners and were far more educated than the average women of their time. That education, along with their highly-respected position as God's holy virgins, gave them a joy and confidence that Mom, struggling to raise seven children, remembered as though they were French-speaking angels floating down from heaven.

1984. My Childhood Home. Metairie, Louisiana. Mom, a beautiful, petite woman, standing five feet tall, places her hands together and pretends she has entered the convent.

"Thank you, Lord. Thank you for the peace that comes with following my vocation."

"Yeah right, Mom. You really wish you could be a nun?"

"Not since Vatican II. They threw out the most beautiful, sacred songs you've ever heard in your life and replaced it with the flung-ah-lung-has, like we're all a bunch of hippies going out to the lake."

"I heard the Pope just put out a new rule, that all nuns now have to wear bell bottoms," my older brother Billy jokes, distracting Mom from her tirade.

"You're kidding," I say, believing every word.

"You know what, Wes," he says. "I looked up gullible in the dictionary, and your name was in the definition."

"Really?" I say, wondering how it got there.

"Oh come on. Of course not!"

Billy, who graduates in the top five of his class at Jesuit when I am still in seventh grade, often describes me with big words I don't yet understand.

"You're such a masochist," he says when he finds me banging my head against my bedroom doorframe. I don't know why I enjoy the feel of the smooth white wood colliding over and over again with my skull, but it makes me feel good somehow.

"A masochist?" I say, puffing out my chest with pride as I slam my head one more time against his doorframe, just to show off. "What's that?"

"It means you like pain."

Masochist. I like the way it sounds, so close to masculine, and with that hard "t" at the end, giving my embrace of pain an almost professional quality. Billy tries to explain that being a masochist isn't something to be proud of, but I'm too busy repeating the word masochist in my head, loving the way it rolls off the tongue. I picture myself as a professional masochist, lying on a bed of nails at a circus, getting stomped by a bull as a rodeo clown, or perhaps rolling out of a speeding automobile as a stunt man. I can already do back flips off of fences and fire hydrants, and I know I can make my exploits much more daring. Before my imagination gets too far, Billy moves on to more practical matters.

"Hey Wes, could you do me a huge favor? I'll be your best friend."

Billy charms me, as he always does, into riding my bike through the rainy night to the local convenience store to buy him a 32-ounce Root Beer, in exchange for a 3-cent piece of gum with the leftover change.

"Thanks, sucker," Billy says affectionately when I hand him the drink, which I spill all over my arm and my bike on the way home, trying to negotiate the curbs and the busy street on which he could have just driven in a car.

When I try the same trick with my younger brothers, they just laugh.

"Yeah, right, you crazy bung hole," Michael, a year younger than me, says when I ask him for a favor.

"I'm not that stupid," Peter, two years younger than Michael, says. "Maybe you're dumb enough to do whatever Billy wants, but I'm not."

I know I'm a sucker, but Billy's a good big brother. He never beats me up, and he shows me how you can hear a very spooky voice saying "Satan" if you play Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven* backwards. He also shares books from Mom's collection, about the battle between God and Satan that is playing out in popular culture as we speak, a war that will ultimately lead to Armageddon. It's scary stuff. One book, in particular, talks about a guy who becomes involved in a Satanic cult and finds himself endowed with supernatural powers. Voluptuous witches appear in his apartment and want to have sex with him. He gets angry at someone and wishes their building to burn down, and when he returns home the fire department is there, cleaning up the ashes. After sacrificing a finger in a Satanic ritual, he finally calls a fundamentalist Christian group that rescues him through the power of prayer.

I get so freaked out by this book, that for a few months I urge my friends not to listen to Led Zeppelin or the Beatles, since they have back-masked subliminal messages that could lead to demonic possession. My obsession with Satan's influence in rock n' roll gradually fades, but when I can't keep myself from having sex with a girlfriend at age fifteen, I wonder if I have accidentally allowed myself to get possessed at some point.

Mom has no doubt that Satan is alive and well in our culture, in TV and movies and filthy novels, trying to lead us down the dark road to hell. Though she gets a kick out of Billy's humor, it isn't enough to distract her from her lament for the old ways, lost in Vatican II.

"Those beautiful old Latin hymns. Why would they go and throw them all away?"

1993. Dodge Park. Omaha, Nebraska. Sister Miranda, I think, has all the spirit of the Middle Age mystics, with none of the stiffness of pre-Vatican II American nuns. She entered the convent right before the changes that swept through the Church in the late 1960s, was one of the last nuns in her order to shave her head before vows to put on the old habit. She knows the traditions, but the changes have allowed her to develop her own spirituality. She understands that following Jesus is more than just sitting alone in a convent praying. When she feeds and clothes the homeless, she is feeding and clothing God on earth. I watch the homeless light up around her loving gaze that penetrates filth, stink, mental illness and addiction to touch human dignity. Where others see worthless bums, she sees the infinite, timeless presence of the Creator.

As we step into woods along the Missouri River, I marvel at the thirty-foot Christmas trees growing wild all around me, and my good fortune at having this mystic nun at my side. Perhaps one day these divine moments will be illustrated on stained glass windows, I think as we stroll deeper into the woods, my guard completely down as we balance on a log, like children. I start to fall, and she grabs my hand. To balance us both on the log, I grab her other hand. It all feels like pure innocence until a wave of electric desire washes through my fingertips. I pull my hands away. The mirth between us dies.

"We better go," I say.

"Oh, okay," she says innocently. "Are you all right?"

"Oh yes. I just need to get back home for dinner."

Am I being too uptight? Saint Augustine says "Love God, and do what you want," and what I want is to keep holding hands with Sister Miranda the rest of that day and into the night. I also want to keep my vocation.

Two weeks later, lying on the massage table in the convent, I remember that moment in the woods and my instinct to run. Sister Miranda isn't afraid. Maybe that's why she's such a healthy nun. Maybe I should not worry about the sexual feelings pulsing through me as she presses her fingertips into the muscles along my vertebrae.

Chapter Five

1521. Pyrenees Mountains. Basque Region, Spain. Iñigo Lopéz de Loyola, his knees shattered, his femur broken in two, is dragged on worn leather stretched over a wooden frame, bouncing, jerking behind a horse, thirty long miles through the rocky, impenetrable country between Pamplona and his family's castle in Loyola, near Azpeitia, Guipúzcoa. The rugged western Pyrennes through which Iñigo bounces, the bones in his leg still crooked, cracked and broken despite French physicians' attempts to patch him up, are so remote and inaccessible that Basque, Iñigo's first language, is still spoken here. Within these jagged limestone and granite peaks, Basque has survived nearly 800 years of Muslim rule over the Iberian Peninsula, and 800 years of Roman domination before that. Iñigo, who five years ago, at age 26 began his service as a *gentilhombre* under the Viceroy of Navarre, in the service of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, shares the determination of his native language.

Despite his shattered legs, he doesn't have a single doubt that he will return to the Viceroy's service after his recovery. His undaunted bravery in rallying a handful of fellow Spaniards against 13,000 French troops has surely made its way to the Emperor's ear, and despite the withering defeat, he feels certain he will be rewarded. His position as *gentilhombre* already gives him access to the king, who allows him the privilege of bearing arms, but he hopes that his bravery will advance him even further. Iñigo has seen, at the royal tournaments, including those held in honor of the coronation of young Charles as Emperor, that excellence in jousting, archery and fencing can attract and win over the elegant female royalty. He dreams that his recent feat of leading armed men with infectious courage is just the beginning, and hopes it will eventually win over the attention of "a certain royal lady," perhaps Eleanor, the Emperor's sister. But before he can enact these dreams, his shattered legs must heal.

Several months after Iñigo arrives at his family's castle in Loyola, his legs have recovered enough strength to stand with the help of crutches. His physicians applaud as he hobbles across the room.

"A most amazing recovery, Don Iñigo," his physicians assure him.

Iñigo tries on a pair of hose, the standard uniform for life at court. He looks at himself in a mirror, proud of the long career that began at age sixteen, when his father sent him away from his boyhood Basque country to Arevalo, in Castilian territory. In Aravelo he served as a page for the treasurer of King Ferdinand II and learned the refined manners that distinguish him as a man of importance and authority. He also discovered drinking, gambling, vanity, and womanizing, and the habitual cultivation of these vices nearly ruined him.

The last time Iñigo visited home, six years before the cannonball shattered his leg, it was during Carnival. He and his brother went out all night, got drunk, concocted some mischief, and sometime during the night were arrested and charged with "premeditated and enormous crimes."

The details of the night are lost to history, but they were serious enough for Iñigo to flee to Pamplona, where he was promptly put in prison. He defended himself in court as a tonsured cleric, though his long hair hid the tonsure that was supposed to mark him as a man of the cloth. The tonsure was, like so many religious symbols left over from the Middle Ages, mostly an excuse for the privileged to abuse their power. But this religious corruption of the Middle Ages was about to give way, across Europe, to the Renaissance, in which every religious function would be questioned, examined and changed forever. The prosecutor scolded Iñigo for professing to live as a man of the Church when his life displays not an ounce of religiosity. In the end, Iñigo escaped punishment.

He still looks distinguished in his fine shirt and cape, even after these months of recovery, and his position of *gentilhombre* still awaits him. But something is dreadfully wrong. A bone protrudes from the hose clinging tightly to his shaking right leg, with is now painfully shorter than the left.

"Reset it," Iñigo says. "And stretch the right one until it matches the left."

"But you are lucky to be alive," the doctors say. "The last thing we want is the death of a *gentilhombre* on our hands."

"If I show up at court with this bone sticking out, limping with uneven legs, I'll never be taken seriously again. There will be no more discussion."

Iñigo takes off the hose and limps to the kitchen downstairs, where the physicians use a handsaw to cut through the leg and re-set the bones. Then they put his right leg on a rack and stretch it. Anesthetic does not yet exist, but Iñigo shows no sign of pain except clenching his fists.

As if to show he is human, Iñigo's body responds violently to the surgery. A heavy fever overtakes him, and for weeks he shivers and mumbles, lapsing into a coma. The doctors are sure this time, that he will die, and they call for a priest to give last rights on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul. Later that night, the doctors can hardly believe it when Iñigo sits up in bed, opening his eyes for the first time in weeks.

"I remember a priest." he says. "There was a light. Saint Peter visited me, healed me."

"It must be a miracle," they say. "Everyone else we've seen in this condition has died."

"I suppose so," he says, "Is there anything good to read in this place? What I wouldn't give for a novel."

1990. Jesuit High School. New Orleans, Louisiana. Light pours in through twenty-five-foot arched windows, bathing an immense watercolor painting of Iñigo, candle in hand, leg shattered, reading a book. The wolves of his family insignia howl around a kettle on a shield hanging behind him. His hardened jaw, the sword at his side, his refusal to yield to the pain of his wounded legs, his mastery of self and knowledge, he is the archetype this school urges us to be. Jesuit High School, the all-boys Catholic school where I am a senior, is founded upon the life experiences of this Basque *gentilhombre*. Only four hundred and fifty years separate us.

We are the student council executive board, wearing khaki uniforms with blue jay patches a quarter-inch below our left shoulder seam and nametags three-quarters of an inch above our right pockets, gathered around a table beneath the painting of Iñigo, black military shoes on our feet, debating my younger brother's suggestion to hold a bake sale to pay for the back-to-school dance.

"Come on, Father," I say to the fifty-something, cigarette-smoking Jesuit priest who runs student council, a fellow who presses his forehead uncomfortably close to mine when he hugs me, but whom I respect. He makes us consider the fact that one day we will die, and who will we want to be at that moment, when we look back at our lives?

"Can't you picture it, brownies and cookies stacked up on table in the yard? We could raise two G in one day."

"You really think a bunch of guys are going to bring in sweets?"

"Father, their Moms will take care of that, and we'll give some kind of prize to the guy who sells the most."

Though the bake sale is the brainchild of my younger brother Michael, I push it as though it is my own, convinced it will work. But as the debate drags on, my mind wanders to where I hope I will be five years in the future.

I'm landing an F-16 fighter plane on an aircraft carrier with ten yards visibility in eighty mile an hour squalls. I've come a long way since those days of weary student council debates. After graduating from the US Naval Academy with honors, I drop bombs on power plants in the occasional skirmish with petty dictators in places like Panama, waiting for the real conflict with the Soviet Union, when I can go one-on-one with Russian MIG fighters. In twenty years, if I play my cards right, I'll retire with a healthy pension from the Navy and move to Montana, where I'll run my own cattle ranch and become a senator.

"Wes, have you contacted the senior homeroom captains about the Thanksgiving drive?" Father asks, extinguishing my bright fantasy.

"I thought that was next week," I say, wondering how I so often seem to miss these little details.

"They need to have pledge forms so they can hand them out to their classes."

"Oh, okay, I'll talk to them today," I say, my mind already drifting to my homeroom, fifty yards from where we sit debating over cupcakes and Thanksgiving drives. Above my homeroom door in the Hall of Honors, a black and white photo of my grandfather looks down at me, his eyes alive, his blood running through my blood. A short, barrel-chested pathologist, graduating from Jesuit High in 1932 and performing his first appendectomy on a destroyer in the Pacific during World War II, he is a fighter and a healer, able to stare evil down to its molecular level, aware that beyond what he can see with a scope or measure, forces of life are at work in this moment, spiritual forces greater than the sum total of biochemical equations and

governments. Grandpa loves the wonder of design and purpose in every living thing, the driving force within each of us, the movement of this force greater than us towards excellence.

As a kid, I followed behind Grandpa as he cut grass, raked leaves and hewed stumps from the ground on an old farm his father, Great Grandpa, bought for his ten children in the 1930s and named Traumerei, after Schumann's piano piece. Great Grandpa, who graduated from Jesuit High in 1903, whose black and white photo also hangs in the Hall of Honors, traveled to Berlin in the early 1900s to study the emerging field of pathology. There he learned, following in the footsteps of Rudolph Virchow, the "father of pathology," and founder of the field of social medicine, to "think microscopically," zeroing in on disease through microscopes, but also to think of disease in social terms. Virchow publicly denounced the pseudo-scientific idea of Aryan superiority at the Anthrophology Congress at Karlsruhe in 1885, arguing, based on his studies of craniometry, that racial purity, which would become the basis of the Holocaust 50 years later, was nothing but a Nordic myth. After studying with Virchow's colleagues and followers for several years, Great Grandpa returned to New Orleans, set up his own pathology practice, taught at Tulane medical school and raised his ten children.

Grandpa, who inherited the pathology practice along with his brother Friedrichs, continued Great Grandpa's teaching and research, mostly looking under the microscope in the tradition of Virchow. But Grandpa also fights disease on the social level. In November of 1955, he defeated a resolution of the Orleans Parish Medical Society to segregate schools based on the spurious idea that black children would be a health threat to whites. It's not something our family discusses. Grandpa is never on the news. He never gets out in the streets to protest. He was thanked for his "singular and courageous stand" against the resolution in a letter from the

administrator of Flint Goodrich hospital, the only hospital in which African American doctors were allowed to practice in New Orleans before 1960.

Grandpa teaches us to do the right thing no matter how unpopular, to quietly forgive while fighting for what we believe is right, to take a direct look at reality, from the microscopic level to the social, without flinching. He brings us down to his medical practice and shows us progressive stages of human fetuses in jars of formaldehyde, explaining at which stage the baby grows fingernails, develops a heartbeat, and sucks its thumb. I learn twenty years later that he quietly supported two of his nieces when they got pregnant, helping them move anonymously to Houston for a year, where he assisted them in arranging adoptions. I also discovered that, as a younger man, Grandpa wasn't so gentle when he returned from the War and two years in the hospital recovering from tuberculosis. Dad was already four years old, having been conceived when Grandpa and my grandmother got married right before Grandpa left for the War, and Grandpa believed Dad had been spoiled by too much attention from too many women. He tried to toughen Dad up, a course of action he would regret many years later.

"You do the best you can with what you got," Grandpa says, as he fills in a hole from a cleared tree stump. "Mother Nature takes care of the rest."

I want to join the Navy like Grandpa, form habits of discipline so when I am 76 years old I will get up like him at five for morning Mass and do push-ups and jump rope before working in the yard all day, in tune with nature, standing up for truth and fairness, my life's tasks largely completed, ready for the final journey.

In the dark mornings before school, I pursue excellence like Grandpa has his whole life, battling the clock in swim practice, fighting aching triceps and lungs screaming for air, cutting the water again and again with my hands until they and the pool became one. The blood races

through my heart, my ears and my eyes, coloring my vision red. I enjoy the camaraderie and winning state, leading cheers and prayers as team captain, but what I revel in more than anything is pushing myself past the point of pain, reaching that place where aching muscles give way to euphoria and a fire burns in my belly and there is no more control, no more volition. My lungs become gills, my hands fins, and my racing spirit watches as if from outside myself as somehow, without effort, my body keeps a time just quicker than the clock.

In the evenings, I learn to transcend time through meditation exercises taught by a Jesuit priest named Father Schiro. In his early sixties, Father Schiro walks through the halls at Jesuit with his head down, deep in thought. While other priests are outgoing, greeting every boy in the school of 1,200 by name, Fr. Schiro keeps to himself. He paces around the campus after school smoking cigars or a pipe peacefully, meditating.

He teaches us to listen to the sounds around us, the humming of the air conditioner, the trickle of water through the pipes overhead, the scolding of the blue jays outside, the rumble of the school bus in the yard. We feel the air on our faces, the shirt on our backs. Without wiggling a toe or a finger, we become aware of each part of our body, the right foot, the left foot, right knee, left knee, right shoulder. As we become aware, we relax, and as we relax, we recognize that God is here in this moment, in this air we breathe, in the creaks of our joints and the whirr of the universe, just audible, if we listen carefully, within and at the same time, beyond all these other sounds.

Each night at home, I practice meditation for five minutes, a requirement of the class on which I will grade myself. After meditating, I am amazed to find that the answers to trigonometry problems, which I normally fight to the point of frustration, present themselves willingly, without effort. And the conversations between Glaucon and Socrates, required reading

for Civics class, so dense and obscure just a few weeks ago, now seem clever and thought provoking. Does might make right? If I wore the mythical ring of Gyges, which makes its wearer invisible, would I behave morally, or would I use my newfound power to my own advantage?

I am only three weeks into the prayer class, and already I feel like it is changing me. I'm enjoying my life more, am more interested in classes, and I even spontaneously tell Mom that I love her. It's not the kind of thing we do in our household, especially not the five boys, but even my two older sisters don't. It's not that we don't love each other, it's just that we don't say it.

Mom cries, and I don't get irritated or freaked out. I hug her, and again, it's not something we do in our family. But she seems moved by it all, and I'm glad it happens. Next year I'll be off to college, and life will never be the same again.

I think about how my life is changing on the drive to Pass Christian, Mississippi for our first prayer class weekend. The weekend, like meditating five minutes per night, is a class requirement, but Father Schiro won't tell us why he takes nine of us from the class at a time, or what we'll be doing. For the first twenty minutes of the drive through the marshes of New Orleans East, we are silent, each in our own worlds, staring out the window. But as we bounce over the twin bridges spanning Lake Pontchatrain, watching the sailboats float by, our cool melts and we begin speaking to each other.

"So Wes, what's Danielle up to this weekend?" Fulton, a musician in our prayer group pipes up.

"No idea," I say. "Guess she'll go to the game, hang out with her friends."

"Y'all didn't talk about it?"

"Not really."

"But y'all have been dating a couple of months now, huh?"

"Yeah, she's great. What's the deal with Home Grown? Any gigs coming up?"

Though I think about Danielle all the time, and our two months of dating is a record length for me, I avoid talking about her because the relationship worries me. We are inches from having sex, and when I've made that mistake with other girls the ensuing guilt hammers me until I break up with them the next day. I've dated a string of six girls, each for no more than a few weeks before we hit that fateful, sexual moment when I must dump them. I don't like making them cry, but I also don't want to go to hell. My buddies at school watch me plough through this parade of nice girls and chide me for being cruel. When I give my rationale, that I can't keep seeing a girl once we've gotten physical because it will lead to more sin, they just shake their heads in disbelief. I am such a player, they reason, that I have even come to believe the lies I used to justify my conquests. As much as I like being with Danielle, it's a relief to be out of town and away from the tension in our relationship.

When we get to the house on pilings along a bayou in Mississippi, Father Schiro sends us outside to play while he makes Sicilian pizza from scratch. After playing volleyball beneath scrawny pine trees for several hours, we are finally called in for warm, fresh pizza. There are no ice chests of beer out on the porch and there's no music. There are no fireworks. No girls. We barely know each other, and none of us are particularly religious. Sitting on the couch between two of my classmates, I feel relaxed.

Father Schiro sits quietly in an easy chair. He hasn't told us anything except that we are gathering to pray. A bright, mischievous look comes over his face as he watches us chat and laugh. Then he picks up a big red book.

Without saying a word, Fr. Schiro has us all silent.

He opens the book and reads, “And Jesus took his disciples out to a quiet place to pray.”

As the words come out of his mouth, I feel different than I’ve ever felt before. It is as though the gaps in time and place between now and the event 2,000 years ago are bridged, and Fr. Schiro has taken us to that place with Jesus and his disciples. A powerful force enters my body and lifts me to a new plane of existence. It feels like a tremendous magnet, like “the force” Luke Skywalker experiences in *Star Wars.* Overwhelmed by this feeling of buoyancy, I wonder if I am levitating, but the feeling is so overwhelming I don’t look down. I’m not looking anywhere, actually. I am enraptured.

Father Schiro keeps reading from the scripture passage, but I’m not listening to the words. An infusion of what feels like pure light penetrates my chest, touching the pit of my stomach and the marrow of my bones. The sensations are physically overwhelming, and yet, they put me at ease. A sense that my life has purpose resounds through my being. I hear it and feel it, and yet it happens on a level that is neither hearing nor feeling. I feel loved and accepted exactly as I am. For those few moments of contact with God, the nagging voice that tells me I am worthless disappears from my head. I know that I exist for a reason.

The buoyant feeling lasts throughout our whole night of prayer. Each of us takes a turn kneeling while Fr. Schiro and the rest of the group prays over us, thanking God for all of the good things they know about us. Though it should feel awkward to kneel in front of regular guys from school and let them put their hands on my head, that buoyant feeling in my chest helps me transcend the awkwardness. Except for a few difficult moments when guys don’t know what to say, everything that happens seems inspired. When guys put their hands on my head and say what they like about me, it feels like God is putting words in their mouths.

The next day we float around in the bayou, convinced that if everyone in the world could feel how we did the night before, the world would be a better place. Jacques, an artist, says he would like to travel in a van to small restaurants and bars throughout the country teaching waitresses and other normal people what we learned the night before. I love Jacques' idea, and am eager to go out and do something like it, but going around the country in a van seems too tenuous. I am thinking of something more disciplined and structured.

"Maybe," I think to myself, "I could become a Jesuit. Maybe that's what all these experiences of God are about."

Chapter Six

1996. Saint Louis University. St. Louis, Missouri. Today they turned on the fountain again. It is eighty-five degrees with a light Northwest breeze, the perfect spring day. The water gushes up ten feet, and when the wind blows it sprays the purple tulips leaping from the ground around the clock tower at St. Louis University. I have just taken an exam on the ideas of Immanuel Kant and am lounging in the sun on a graded platform, next to other students, trying to let Kant's categorical imperative evaporate from my thought process forever. I've taken it in like bronchial cough syrup, wanting to gag, but swallowing it and then regurgitating it on the exams because my superiors prescribe it as necessary for priesthood. All winter long, I have wrestled with Kant and Hume and Locke, giving due consideration to each new idea that repulses me more than the last.

In making moral decisions, Kant argues we should always consider whether we could prescribe the same action for everyone in our situation.

"*What about falling in love?"* I think, remembering the passion I felt in Santa Maria Chiquimula less than a year before, a passion that philosophy studies seem to be systematically draining away. Shouldn't love be the reason we act in a morally positive way? If we act out of love, won't we know the right thing immediately, instead of wasting our time with some abstract idea that may or may not apply to someone in our situation? And how could we presume to know what would be right for someone else, since we all are endowed with different gifts and intelligences and personalities?

Young women, many my age, walk by wearing shorts and short-sleeved T-shirts. As I look at the smooth skin on their freshly shaved legs I feel like I haven't seen a woman in a very long time. I am on the Varsity swim team and every day for two and a half hours, in nothing but

a Speedo and goggles, I move through the water a few feet from the girls on the team. They wear drag-resistant, skin-tight suits and their bodies are sleek, and I have felt moments of attraction to them. But we are there to work out and they know me. They know I am a Jesuit, and my superior allows me to be there only if I make the team a platform for spiritual outreach. Every day after swim practice I hurry home to Mass, reminding myself that I am on the swim team purely to form chaste relationships that transcend the sensual aspects of physical being, to support my teammates in their dreams and struggles without sex getting in the way. I am there as an example, as someone who has vowed chastity but is still fairly normal. But now it is April, and swim team has ended for the year. I have free time to sit and breathe and soak in the spring air, and the feelings I have kept locked up all winter are bubbling to the surface.

On the other side of the fountain from where I am sitting, there is a bronze statue of two Native Americans kneeling in front of a cross held up by the Belgian Jesuit Pierre DeSmet. The statue recalls the two Salish natives who traveled to St. Louis in 1839 seeking "black robes" to come and teach their people. The Salish sent four delegations to St. Louis looking for black robes between 1831 and 1839, most of whom were either killed by enemy tribes or died of disease when they reached St. Louis. The last delegation, two French-speaking Salish, finally met with Pierre DeSmet. In 1840, DeSmet set out to meet the Salish people in Montana, the first of his many journeys across the West. DeSmet would go on to become a trusted figure among Native leaders, including Sitting Bull, and would help broker treaties among warring tribes and between hostile tribes and the US government.

There is something in this Northwest breeze that awakens me, blowing in from the Gateway Arch two miles away, the symbol of St. Louis as the last stop before the frontier. This breeze, and the yellow daffodils on the hill behind me, and the girls and the fountain remind me

that life is more than a discussion of ideas. The campus is teeming with life, and I haven't once picked up the student newspaper since I arrived in the fall.

I grab a *University News* from the bookstore and head back to the sun-soaked platform, where I skim through the articles until one editorial jumps out from the rest. "In a university that claims to have such high moral values," Elizabeth Havice writes, protesting the statue directly in front of me, "it is inconceivable that a statue which so clearly celebrates the decimation of the Native American people and the triumph of Western civilization and Christianity is allowed to stand…" She goes on to describe how she crept out barefoot at midnight to hang a sign protesting the statue, but to her chagrin the sign had been taken down by the repressive public safety department.

The passion and authenticity of her voice grabs me. I hurry home to our computer lab in the basement of our Jesuit study community two blocks from campus, typing out a response:

"Dear Elizabeth, I sympathize completely with your concern for the Native American people, and admire your efforts to protest the statue. I'm sorry that public safety took down the sign you hung around the priest's neck at midnight, but I believe that your furtive mission to raise awareness has only just begun. I recently spent four months on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota and during that time learned a great deal from the Lakota people about being more in tune with nature. I was fortunate to attend several sweat ceremonies in the company of Jesuit priests who revere and participate in traditional Lakota practices. Unfortunately, the Jesuits have not always had such great respect for Native American culture, and were part of a government program whereby various religious groups in North America were assigned to "civilize" specific tribes. However, I disagree that the statue should be taken down. It is a historical depiction of a sincere Salish delegation traveling to St. Louis to ask

Father Pierre DeSmet, SJ to please send Black Robes to educate his people. My interpretation is that Salish are kneeling before the cross that DeSmet holds up, not in front of DeSmet, though it is unfortunate that DeSmet is portrayed as being on "higher ground."

Elizabeth writes me back almost immediately:

"*Thank you very much for your kind response. I am grateful that such a high-ranking member of the clergy would take the time to write out such a thoughtful letter…"*

I feel such an authenticity in her voice that I have to meet her. Maybe she would make a good volunteer at Red Cloud in South Dakota, or be interested in the work the Central American Jesuits are doing on behalf of the Quiché. After talking it over with Pat Lynch, an Irish American scholastic from Omaha who regularly burns sweet grass and cedar as part of his prayer, setting off smoke detectors in the house and pissing off our superior, I write Elizabeth back, inviting her to dinner.

The possibility that Elizabeth might be physically attractive doesn't occur to me until after Mass, when I sit down on the front porch swing of our restored Victorian mansion to wait for her. It is the second of three restored Victorian mansions in a row, each beautifully furnished and decorated, which the fifteen Jesuits scholastics and three priests, and two brothers in our philosophy studies community call home.

When I see her for the first time, walking up the street in a thin, light green spring dress, I know I'm in trouble. Judging from her smile and the way she looks at me with those green eyes, so vibrant and present, I imagine she feels the same.

I lead her through the house to the back porch, where the other twenty guys sit around talking and relaxing with drinks. It is a beautiful day, and after introducing Elizabeth to several of the guys, I invite her onto the patio, where we sit in the sun to talk.

"This place is really nice," she says. "Much nicer than I expected."

"Yeah," I say. We're really spoiled."

A breeze blows up, just strong enough to blow Elizabeth's dress off of her calves. They are firm and finely shaped, and her skin is a healthy olive color. She smiles in a self-conscious way and pulls the flowery cloth back over her exposed skin.

"And the guys here seem cool," she says. "Kind of normal."

"I know," I say. "Surprising, huh?"

"Yeah. I definitely didn't expect to see people drinking beer."

"Oh yeah. We can drink all we want. But no sex."

"I definitely don't get that part," she says. "Have you seen *Braveheart?"*

She smiles almost the entire time we're together. Her teeth are bright white, surrounded by full, fleshy lips. The breeze continues to play with her dress, but after a while she stops worrying about it.

Eventually we move over to the first house, where Sue, our cook, serves pork chops stuffed with apples, mashed sweet potatoes and green beans. Conversations at dinner usually turn into arguments over Kant's critique of pure reason, or the limitations of the use of social science in interpreting scripture, but with Elizabeth things lighten up.

She tells us how her friends recently took a trip to Australia, where they rented a car and drove into the backcountry. Tragically, they hit a kangaroo. Everyone got out of the car to look at the poor, apparently dead kangaroo, and then they propped it up and began taking pictures with it. The driver put his coat on the kangaroo, and they took more pictures. Then the kangaroo suddenly woke up and hopped away, with the driver's jacket still on, with the keys still in the jacket.

Elizabeth is a breath of fresh air in our all-male, academically oriented house, and a week after dinner she sends a thank you note with her phone number printed near the bottom of the page. I call her immediately, and we agree to meet the next night.

When I get to the fountain she is waiting for me, shoes in hand, a breathless smile on her face.

"Where should we go?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "How about we walk around?"

"Okay," she says. "But you have to take off your shoes and walk barefoot."

"You're kidding."

She looks at me with sincere disbelief. I can see her pupils expanding and contracting, taking in me, my shoes, the moon behind me, the trees swaying in the breeze. I've never met anyone so physically present in the moment.

"Come on," she says. "There are over seven thousand nerve endings in your feet, more than anywhere else in your body, except… you know. So, why shouldn't we feel every step of the way, so we can appreciate every moment even more?"

I can't argue with that. God is present in every moment, in every blade of grass and pebble and inch of concrete. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius encourages the use of all five senses in contemplating God's goodness, so why shouldn't I do the same on this cool night, in the company of one of God's most sensitive, alive and intelligent creatures?

Chapter Seven

Dad sets up the smoker alone, at two in the morning. His only fanfare is the pop of flame bursting from the wooden match he uses to light up the coals as black as the night around him. By eight o'clock, hickory smoke curls around the turkey, wafting around the yard and through my windows. My stomach growls in response, already hungry.

Later, my brothers and I play football in the yard, tackling and elbowing and pushing each other across the patch of dirt that used to be grass last spring, before the deadly combination of cold weather and us trampling it with constant football games. After an incremental increase in flare-ups of temper, one of us blows a fuse and the game stops.

By two o'clock in the afternoon my belly, taunted by the enticing odor of hickory smoked turkey meat all day, made worse by my refusal to eat so that I can stuff myself at dinner, has sent emergency signals to my brain and I scream at my brothers and sisters at the top of my lungs: "We're eating!"

They ignore me, wrapped up in belly dancing contests, listening to records, and talking on the phone with their friends.

"We're eating!" I shout angrily, wondering why they don't drop everything and proceed immediately to the dinner table so we can gormandize on Dad's smoked turkey. I haven't yet learned that sometimes a whisper is far more effective than a scream. Finally, fifteen minutes later, when I have given up after what feels like an eternity, we all sit down around the dinner table, and halfway through eating we say what we're thankful for.

"I'm thankful we didn't name the cat Bat's Breath, that the devil didn't bite me when I sat down on the toilet, and let's see… something positive. Can't think of anything. Oh well, that's it for me," Billy, the oldest says.

"I'm glad God didn't strike me with lightning when we danced on the lakefront with aluminum foil hats on our heads," Michael, fourteen months younger than me, says.

"You didn't," Lucy, one of my two older sister says.

"Oh yes," I say. "Same day two UNO students were struck by lightning and died."

"Nooo, Michael. You didn't," my Mom croons, her eyes wide, a hint of amusement at this ridiculous prank.

Dad just shakes his head, resigned to not worrying about things out of his control, the embodiment of *laissez faire*. His mantra, in running his family of seven kids and Ozone Spring Water, the city's largest locally owned bottle water company is: "The best thing you can do is usually nothing,"

"Yeah, we're idiots," Michael says, tapping his celery stick against his plate like it's a cigar. An idiot my brother, who can sight read ancient Greek and will plough through the honors program at the University of Texas in three years to start medical school at age 20, is not. But he does enjoy displaying an at-times comical lack of common sense. He morphs his voice to sound exactly like my maternal Grandma Rosabelle, who grew up in the early 1900s on a plantation in central Louisiana, who taught me to gamble at age 11: "Y'all want a beer or a high ball or somethin'?"

Peter, the second to youngest, pipes up, "Can't we say the things we're ungrateful for?"

"Hunter," Billy says, imitating the gravelly voice of my parents' best friend, Mickey McGregor, talking to his twelve year-old son: "Run down to the Circle K. Get me a six-pack of beer, and a carton of cigarettes. Naked."

Mickey doesn't really say the naked part. But Billy includes it as part of the growing comedy routine he and my younger brothers carry on every time we get together. Mickey

McGregor, a hard-drinking Scots Irish Catholic, goes from valedictorian of my Dad's class at Jesuit High to earning his PhD in Chemistry from Harvard, then comes back to New Orleans to run his father's plumbing business, do genealogy, collect butterflies and matchbooks, and gather old New Orleans music on reel-to-reel tapes. When he gets drunk enough, Mickey sits at the piano and plays Ray Charles, Fats Domino, Ernie K-Doe and Papa Celestine, with my parents and Mickey's wife Kathleen singing back-up. They moan like Haitian zombies at a voodoo séance when Mickey plays "Marie Laveau, Voodoo Queen."

Around midnight, they inevitably run out of booze, but a 12 year-old kid can execute a beer run for his father in New Orleans, no questions asked. Especially during Mardi Gras season, when the party starts with king cake covered in green, gold and purple icing and filled with a plastic baby Jesus, and goes so late, our whole family crashes out on the McGregor's floor, each kid finding a nook somewhere to sleep.

When Billy exhausts the comic depths of our connection with the McGregors, our Thanksgiving routine moves to Bip, the youngest, short and stout like Grandpa and endowed with the most friendly and open personality of all of us. Bip imitates Chicolini, a former peanut vendor who becomes Rufus T. Firefly's Secretary of War in the Marx Brothers classic *Duck Soup*, one of the few movies Mom allows us to watch, for fear that everything Hollywood has put out since Vatican II is possessed by the devil. Chicolini, responding to suggestions from a Freedonian senator to raise taxes for impending war, declares: "Taxes, I got an uncle that lives in Taxes,"

"No, no," Bip says imitating the flabbergasted Freedonian senator, "I mean money, dollars."

"That's where he's from," Bip says in a fake Italian accent, "Dollars, Taxes."

I enthusiastically throw in one of Rufus T. Firefly's lines from another part of the movie, sure it will stoke the fires of hilarity: "Oh yeah, what about the old Maestro?"

Everyone stops laughing.

"Gotta thank Wes for pulling the curtain on the comedy routine," Billy says, and everyone starts laughing again. My jokes so often bring a blanket of silence, my not being funny becomes my comic strength.

1990. St. Charles College. Grand Coteau, Louisiana. I am grateful to have such a fun family, who loves me despite my mercurial personality and lack of comic talent, and I miss them this year at Thanksgiving, when I am away from home for the first time ever. But I am absolutely certain I must be here, in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, making a three-day silent vocation discernment retreat. I'm seventeen years old, a senior in high school, and for a full month I've been trying to decipher whether God is calling me to the priesthood. A letter from Senator J. Bennett Johnson sits on my desk at home, nominating me to the US Naval Academy, and just up the stairs from that letter, my family sits around the dining room table cracking each other up.

During the first two days of this retreat, I've prayed more than I thought possible, using Father Schiro's meditation techniques to ease into hour-long prayer sessions, where I am infused with gratitude for the intricate patterns etched on the backs of leaves and feel awe at the dancing shadows cast by sunlight streaming through lilting oak branches, the ripples set off by raindrops in puddles on the pavement, and the symphony of calling sparrows, mockingbirds, and blue jays.

I'm sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of St. Charles College, an accredited institution of higher learning from 1837 to 1868, now home of the Jesuit novitiate and spirituality center. Azalea bushes and the thickest, tallest pine trees I have ever seen line the drive in front

of me, leading to the thin wrought-iron fence that stretches for nearly a quarter of a mile, separating the well-kept grounds of the college from the Cajun town of 1,200 souls at the edge of the South Louisiana prairie.

When I first drive through the one stop-light in town, I am amazed at the immensity of the college, rising up like a white-washed castle, towering above the historic town. Grand Coteau boasts over 40 structures, mostly Acadian cottages and a smattering of Victorian homes, on the National Register of Historic Places.

The French Jesuits who built Saint Charles College for boarding students in 1837, just 34 years after the Louisiana Purchase, were attracted to the wild prairies and bayous surrounding Grand Coteau by the donation of a large tract of land from a local widow. An offer of 200,000 free bricks from the Sacred Heart nuns, who established their own school and convent here fifteen years earlier, in 1821, solidified the Jesuits' decision to move here. These priests and nuns were convinced that Grand Coteau, with its educational institutions and ideal location on high ground, would become a thriving metropolis. The Civil War devastated their hopes. The crippling poverty and lack of students after the war drove the Jesuits to close the doors of Saint Charles College as an institution of higher learning forever.

The resulting peace and quiet serves the spirituality center well. There is a peaceful gravity to this place that settles down the soul and renews the heart, and the longer I am here the more I long to stay. If I apply to the Jesuits and am accepted in the fall, Saint Charles College will become my home during novitiate, the first two years of Jesuit life. Those two years will prepare me to take perpetual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, but right now I am not sure I can handle life without girls. And I've worked hard for my nomination to the Naval

Academy, pulling up my grades, becoming senior class president and captain of our state champion swim team. To throw it all away seems foolish.

I pick up the *Autobiography of Saint Ignatius*, and read the story of Iñigo the injured *gentilhombre*, long before he became Ignatius the saint, lying on his bed, frustrated with the speed of his recovery.

1521. Loyola Castle. Azpeitia, Guipúzcoa, Spain. Iñigo leaves the only books they find for him, *The Lives of the Saints* and *The Life of Christ*, on the bedside table for several hours, feeling sorry for himself. He's not a particularly religious man, aside from the occasional visit to church on major feast days. Before the battle in Pamplona, he and a friend confessed their sins to God, knowing they could die in the face of such overwhelming French odds, but any self-respecting Spaniard of the same era, wishing to avoid the fires of hell, would have done the same.

"I should be back in Navarre, helping the Duke re-take Pamplona. Instead I'm stuck here, where they can't even turn up a decent novel. What I wouldn't give for a copy of *Amadis de Gaula.*"

Rather than read the pious books, Iñigo stares out the window, imagining his triumphant return to the court, wearing fine new clothes and riding a sleek Arabian steed. Not only would his legs be healed and straight, to the marvel of everyone there, he would also have gathered ten thousand men along the way and re-taken Pamplona. The next step for him and his army would be rooting out the stubborn remaining Moors, recently expelled from the newly formed empire of Spain by Ferdinand II and Isabella. Eleanor, the Emperor's daughter, would personally take him by the hand and lead him to her private quarters, where she would press a bag of gold escudos

into his hands and demand that he soon return. He would bow humbly, mysteriously disappear, and venture off on some new campaign against a vicious enemy, the details of which would make Eleanor quiver with desire. When he returned to court, Eleanor would demand that he stay. She would make him a duke, and when he refused the honor, out of chivalrous humility, she would throw herself at him and demand that he marry her, despite her brother's insistence she marry the king of Portugal.

At the coronation ceremony, Iñigo would receive the kind of honor he deserves for his long years of steadfast knightly service to Spain. The entire royal court would applaud as he strode down the aisle, his footsteps muffled by the adulation and the soft carpet beneath his feet.

He imagines the ensuing banquets, where he would again and again be honored, the dukes and princes bowing to him, bringing him so many cleverly wrought gold and silver ornaments he would lose track of what came from whom. At tables lined with intricate Madeira lace, he would feast on unlimited paella, wild goose, and well-marbled steak, washing it all down with vintage rioja, wiping his face with a delicate silk napkin. His belly would grow as the years roll by, his cares frittering away at masquerade balls and intimate royal gatherings in manors across Europe.

These images linger as he moves through long days of recovery, dulling his senses like an imperceptible velvet hammer, shaping the images of luxury and privilege into daydreams of power. At first, in his mind, he rules generously, doling out gold and titles to fill out the rapidly expanding empire of Spain. But as he pictures the treasury slowly dwindling in response to this sort of largesse, the images shift again, to him sitting on the throne. Failed conquistadors kneel before them, having lost their ships to hurricanes and their crews to savages in the New World.

"I give you sixty thousand ducats a year ago, and you waste it on incompetent navigation and reckless excursions."

"But your majesty, we understood there would be risks."

"A risk is one thing, an extravagant waste of precious funds and manpower, that's entirely different."

These daydreams leak into his consciousness, turning to anger at the maids who spill soup on his lap, the doctors who lie to him, telling him the legs will set evenly, and the aching, atrophying muscles in his back. After weeks of these daydreams and anger swirling into depression, he longs to think of something else, anything else. He looks over at the books lying on the bedside table, still peeved that not one person in the Loyola household could find him one romance novel. But he knows he'll be here for months, trapped in this bed, the daydreams swirling him further and further into darkness. He reaches over and picks up *The Lives of The Saints*.

251 AD. Lower Egypt. Along the verdant shores of the Nile, 18 year-old Anthony suddenly loses his parents, leaving him alone to watch over his sister and tend his family's crops, cattle, sheep, slaves and modest stores of gold. He is extremely sensitive, so much so that his now deceased parents pull him from the local Greek school because he comes home crying every day. Now they are gone, and there is nowhere left for Anthony to hide, no one there to protect him. Devastated by his parents' absence, he visits the nearby Christian church, a refuge from the new weight of responsibility and the prying eyes of the townspeople who already find him strangely shy and reclusive. In that church, where, side by side with his parents, he learned that

death has no sting, that death is no barrier to union with those we love, he hears the words of Jesus: “If you want to be happy, go, sell what you have, give it to the poor and follow me.”

Anthony takes the words literally, distributing the land and slaves, cattle, sheep and gold among the perplexed, but quietly delighted villagers, and leaves his sister with a group of Christian virgins. He ventures into the foreboding Nitrian desert, past the Scete (the land of ascetics) where a cenobitic community of Christians fleeing the pleasures and distractions of the world already exists. In the middle of this wasteland where nothing grows, they pray, practice self-denial, and welcome all visitors with warm, simple hospitality and spiritual advice. Anthony walks over 50 kilometers past these hermits, through boiling sands and rocks visited only by teams of Egyptians slaves to extract nitron, a salt-like drying compound used in the mummification process.

Anthony spends 13 years here, where no human being in his right mind has ever lived alone, fasting, praying, and making ropes and reed mats to exchange with the hermits back in the Scete, who compete with each other to see who can push themselves to greater ascetic limits. If one hermit eats nothing but eight ounces of bread and a cup of water per day, the next guy lives on five ounces of bread and half a cup of water. A hermit who recognizes in himself the unholy desire for revenge, when he smashes a stinging mosquito, goes to the swamp and sits among his brother mosquitos, allowing them to feast freely for a full week. So swollen and distorted is his skin, that nobody recognizes him when he returns to the weekend gathering of ascetics on the Scete.

Living in far more rugged and isolated conditions than anyone else, fasting longer, and giving greater trust in God for his survival, Anthony puts the competing ascetics back on the Scete to shame. The devil, threatened by Anthony’s willingness to renounce the ways of the

flesh so thoroughly, tempts him to lust and laziness with visions of beautiful women, and when the visions fail to work, the devil beats him unconscious. Were it not for the Anthony's friends, who find him at death's door and rescue him, the story would end there.

When Anthony recovers, to the astonishment of his friends he goes back to the desert, even deeper, settling finally in an abandoned Roman fort, where he locks himself behind a gate, praying and working with his hands. Word gets out among the weary few who journey through these parts. Visitors trickle in, exchanging food for spiritual advice through a dark crevice. The devil returns, hounding Anthony in the guise of ferocious wolves, scorpions, snakes, and lions. Anthony taunts the visions like a pack of bullies, "if you were really as tough as you appear to be, why are there so many of you?" For twenty years, Anthony struggles against his own laziness, fear and lust, and finally, one day, he is rewarded when the visions disappear and a bright light from the heavens shines down on him, bathing him with happiness.

Anthony breaks down the gate behind which he has locked himself for twenty years. People flock to him, recognizing his glow of happiness and wisdom, setting up hovels near his dwelling and seeking his advice.

Anthony hears of Christians being martryed by the thousands in Alexandria, fifty kilometers to the East, and walks there in the midst of a bloodbath unleashed by the Roman Emperor of the East, Maximin Daia, despite the recent Edict of Milan, issued by Constantine, proclaiming universal tolerance for Christianity throughout the Empire. Anthony, fearing nothing, walks through Alexandria proclaiming his faith openly, hoping to be martyred. The governor of Alexandria approaches Anthony, warning him to leave the city, but Anthony refuses, trying to convert the governor to Christianity. Several months later, Constantine's allies defeat Maximin Daia, destroying all intolerance towards Christianity. With the persecution finished,

Anthony returns to his fortress in the desert to continue his life of holy asceticism. Hundreds of disciples follow him, establishing their own ascetic lives in the desert, forming communities that gradually become monasteries. The athletic asceticism that Anthony spurs on by his extreme austerity finds its pinnacle one hundred years later in Saint Simeon Stylites, who lives on the top of a pillar in the Syrian desert for 37 years, so revered as a holy man by visiting pilgrims that he hardly finds a quiet moment for himself.

1521. Loyola Castle. Azpeitia, Guipúzcoa, Spain. Iñigo, reading of these feats of asceticism and holiness, wonders if he has the willpower and dedication to do what Anthony and Saint Simeon Stylites did. To give up red wine and meat, essentials of the Basque diet, would be tough enough, but to walk across burning sands and sharp rocks barefoot? To give up his fine clothes and the pleasure of women, when his own brother Pedro, a priest, has just watched his mistress give birth to a son, seems nearly impossible.

Why does Iñigo even consider these ideas? In a few months, when he is well, he will return to Navarre to serve the Viceroy and resume his life at court, where drinking, gambling and womanizing are standard. He pictures himself limping around the court, barefoot like Saint Anthony, speaking of spiritual happiness. Surely the nobles would laugh at him, wondering what happened to good ole fun-loving Iñigo. Would he tell them that fun is for children, but if they wish to be truly happy, they should give up their jealous pursuit of honor and riches? Iñigo himself is not ready to give up these pursuits, so how will he ever exhort others to do the same?

Chapter Eight

1991. St. Charles College. Grand Coteau, Louisiana. The old elevator labors upwards, shaking and groaning, finally lurching to a stop a full foot below the fourth floor. After sliding open the stiff steel folding gate, I step into an extended crow's nest in this castle of a building that dominates the historic, deteriorating houses of the town. Past a 1940s Koken vintage barber chair, where novices have cut each others' hair for nearly a hundred years, through a room stacked with Latin and Greek books in rotting boxes on dusty shelves, is a moth-eaten scarlet curtain hanging over the doorway to the old chapels.

I push past the curtain and enter the musty, carpeted hallway leading to six tiny chapels, imagining eager young priests in the 1950s, in black cassocks and horn-rimmed glasses, rattling off their individual mandatory Masses in Latin, the chapel freshly renovated. They have to be quick, to make room for the next wave to practice their sacred craft and get on with the day.

Forty years later, there are no priests younger than forty in this community. Priests are no longer required to say Mass each day, and finding a Mass in Latin is about as common as finding a working mule. Dead wasps lay scattered about the worn carpet that covers the chapel floors. The stained glass windows look thrown together, a yellow pane here, a green one there, a few clear and blue frames unevenly mismatched together. Perhaps there was once an expensive, sacred piece of stained glass decorating the musty facades above the altars, but now the windows look neglected, like so much of the college.

I choose the chapel with a remaining altar façade, the communion host chiseled above a chalice, inscribed with the words "hic est corpus meum." I listen carefully to each creak of the college floor, still settling since its 1909 construction, after fires destroyed the 1858 and 1837

buildings, my heart beating fast as I pray no ghosts will lash out at me for invading this forgotten sacred space. Then I sit on the carpet and begin my prayer.

I am ten days into the thirty-day silent retreat, doing the full *Spiritual Exercises,* developed by Iñigo during his conversion process. The exercises are the cornerstone of the two-year novitiate, the key formation period in Jesuit life. I am eighteen years old, and since my entrance into the novitiate three months ago, I've intentionally cut off contact with all my family and friends until this retreat ends. I want a clean break with my past, like Iñigo made when he left his castle to go on pilgrimage.

Though most days I feel a sense of deep consolation regarding that decision, on the tough days I picture myself with friends at LSU, doing keg stands at the DKE fraternity house, surrounded by sorority girls hyped up on jungle juice. Some nights I lie awake long into the night, yearning for the girls from high school, remembering the tender moments when we lost control and our bodies and emotions came crashing to a crescendo.

Sitting on the floor of the chapel, I close my eyes, asking God to clear my mind of carnal thoughts, to guide me along this spiritual path as God guided Iñigo over 450 years ago.

1521. Loyola Castle. Azpeitia, Guipúzcoa, Spain. The day when Iñigo will be able to walk again draws ever closer, and as he contemplates which road he will take away from his childhood home, he notices that when he dreams of giving up all his worldly possessions and living a life completely in the service of God, he feels a great weight of despair. A man of his nobility and age can't handle it. The laughter of the royalty will shame him into his old way of life, and what good will that do anyone? He has felt this despair before, when the streets of Pamplona were deserted in preparation for the imminent French attack, and he knows what it is

to face the despair and continue despite the odds. He stares the despair in the face, arguing that even if he fails, to undertake such noble efforts is worth the risk. When the despair fades, a deep sense of inner peace, and a oneness with the universe and God, washes over him. The peace lasts several weeks, and he decides that this spirit, which urges him to trust God, venturing out to serve the poor and the sick, is a spirit of good.

When he dreams of the honor and glory he will achieve in battle, and the lust he will generate in the loins of his noble lady, he briefly feels a thrill of joy, but the longer he contemplates the reality of the privileged life at court, the joy turns to a depression that lingers for weeks. This spirit, which leads him to think in selfish terms, growing more and more miserly and proud the longer he considers its directives, he calls the "enemy of human nature," or the evil spirit.

He asks for a notebook, and begins copying down the passages from the *Lives of The Saints* that seem most poignant, along with notes about the movements of these spirits. He reads *The Life of Christ*, copying out the words of Jesus in red ink, and the words of the Virgin Mary in blue ink, pondering these words to their depths, repeating them over and over so that they take root deep in his soul and become part of him. He contemplates his own death, wondering what sort of man will lie in the grave of Iñigo de Loyola, one who spent his life gathering power and wealth for himself, or one who spent his life giving generously of himself to others.

After months of considering his next path, it becomes clear that there is only one real choice, giving his life over to God, and as the light and consolation of choosing this path deepens, the images of pursuing honor and glory for himself fade. One night, as he lies in bed contemplating his life in relation to the saints, he sees, very clearly, the Virgin Mary and the Child Jesus hovering above his bed, smiling down on him. The vision lasts for nearly an hour,

and afterwards he feels absolute bliss at God's immeasurable love for him, and in the bright light of that love he feels disgust for his own selfishness. From this moment forward, he reports in his *Autobiography,* he never gives consent to the thoughts of the flesh again.

Everyone in the household notices a change in Iñigo, as though a bright light has been turned on somewhere deep inside of him. Six months before, when he was dragged to the entrance of the house, his legs still bloody from the cannonball, he was fiercely silent, even in the face of excruciating pain. He rarely spoke a kind word to anyone, and even when he did it seemed more from formality than a sincere wish for the other person's good. Now, in a great about-face, he speaks openly with everyone, including the servants, about his love for God.

"Isn't it amazing, when you stop to think of everything God has given us here in this beautiful green valley? The herds of sheep for making warm, soft blankets, the cows that give us milk and cheese, the stars so warm and bright in the night sky."

"I guess I don't really think about it," they say, finding themselves uplifted by his contagious joy, but secretly wondering if perhaps the cannonball that shattered his legs also cracked his mind up a bit. His family notices the change, and though they are happy to see him in better spirits, they worry that this newfound enthusiasm with religion will sweep the honorable, courageous Iñigo they once knew away with it.

Despite the doctors' insistence that Iñigo spend more time in bed, he forces himself to walk further and further, stretching his legs often, healing more quickly than the doctors expect. Where Iñigo is planning to go, he will need all the strength his legs can give him. While he is considering many possibilities in his service of Christ, the idea that appeals most to him is literally following in the footsteps of Jesus in Jerusalem, the very place where Jesus and his disciples lived and walked, where Jesus suffered his passion and death for love of all humanity.

Perhaps there, in the Holy Land, where the spirit of charity in the flesh showed humanity how to love as God loves, Iñigo will become a great saint and convert the Muslims who occupy the city.

He doesn't yet know how he will get to Jerusalem, and he recognizes that he still has ingrained bad habits, after so many years of vice and selfishness. One day he gets very angry with his sister-in-law when she tells visitors from a rival clan, who have asked to borrow a pack of hounds, that they are not *in the house*. While her statement is technically true, it excludes the fact that the hounds are *near enough* to the house that they are available for use. If the sister-in-law were behaving generously, she would have lent them to the rival clan. Iñigo is so angry with her for reserving the full truth that he doesn't speak to her for days, realizing only after extensive self-examination that he has blown the matter out of all proportion.

He understands that if he really hopes to follow in the footsteps of the Lord of mercy, he will need some training. He asks one of the servants, preparing for an errand to nearby Burgos, where there is a monastery, to gather information about the monks' way of life. The servant fulfills the request to Iñigo's satisfaction, explaining the monks' rules and what a potential monk must do to seek entrance into the monastery, but word of Iñigo's request circulates around the house and instills fear in the hearts of his family. He is now walking without the help of crutches, though with a slight limp that will stay with him for the rest of his life, and has begun packing his belongings for his imminent departure.

His older brother Martin, who has run the household for twenty-four years, since 1498, pulls Iñigo aside.

"They tell me you're almost ready to go. So what's your plan, little brother?"

"Thought I'd visit the Viceroy at Navarette, see of what service I can be."

"You're not planning something foolish?"

"My plans with the Viceroy are as I've told you."

What Iñigo doesn't admit for fear of upsetting his older brother Martin, or worse, being talked out of his plans, is that Iñigo will give away everything he owns, as part of his spiritual journey to Jerusalem. Martin sends two servants and his younger brother Pedro, the priest who recently fathered a child, to make sure Iñigo arrives safely at Navarette without doing anything foolish.

After parting with Pedro at their sisters' house along the way, Iñigo continues on to Navarette, where he successfully avoids the Viceroy and all persons of royalty, collects his salary, pays off his debts, dismisses his servants, and sets out on a mule towards Montserrat, where he intends to visit the holy shrine built around the black statue of the Madonna "as a poor pilgrim."

Iñigo meets a Moor along the way, and in his newfound fervor, engages the Moor in a religious conversation, hoping to convert him. The Moor agrees with many of Iñigo's assertions, including that Mary conceived of Jesus by divine means, not human. He confesses that Mary is a Virgin until the moment she gives birth, but refuses to agree that Mary is still a Virgin after she gives birth.

Disguising his building rage at the Moor's theological intransigence, Iñigo holds himself to charity in the Moor's presence, but is torn with conflicting emotions after the Moor rides ahead. Should he drag the Moor to the shrine at Montserrat, and there stab him until he confesses that Mary remained a Virgin until her death? Or should he let the Moor go, and allow God to administer justice where justice is due? Iñigo wears himself out, weighing all these options, and finally decides to let God and his donkey decide his path. If Iñigo's donkey chooses the wider, more level Royal Highway, Iñigo will hunt down the Moor and force his confession of

loyalty to the Virgin. If the donkey chooses the rougher, less traveled village road, Iñigo will allow the Moor to live. The donkey chooses the village road, and Iñigo follows in the peaceful footsteps of Jesus without the fresh blood of a homicide on his hands.

At Montserrat, Iñigo makes a three-day, written confession of all his sins to a monk, hangs his fine sword and shield in the shrine, donates the mule to the monastery, and after an all-night vigil, in which he dedicates himself to the service of the Virgin, exchanges his fine clothes for a beggar's sackcloth. Free of his wealth and noble privilege, free to follow Christ without help from the Pope or the Emperor, from whom he could still ask money and passage for his journey to Jerusalem, he walks barefoot in sackcloth to the small town of Manresa. There, Iñigo plans to spend a few days before continuing East towards Barcelona, and then, the Holy Land. The few days somehow become eleven months.

Despite his efforts to remain anonymous, the people of Manresa, particularly the women, are immediately taken with this well-mannered, fine-featured young pilgrim, whom they at first call "the sack man." They give him soup and places to stay, and help him trim his rough sackcloth suit so that it is even on both sides. They spy him praying at roadside shrines and making all-night vigils in the local chapels, where he sometimes sleeps for a few hours on the stone floor before getting out to beg for food and speak to strangers of the things of God. He spends most of his time in a cave outside of town, praying and scribbling in the notebook he calls *The Spiritual Exercises*, to guide himself and to help others along the divine pathways.

He enthusiastically imitates the desert fathers, letting his hair and fingernails grow out wildly, and whipping himself with a discipline each night, but finds to his dismay that the more he confesses the sins of his past, the more horrible he feels about himself. After fasting and praying for a solid week, he recognizes that the evil spirit is leading him further and further into

darkness under the guise of doing good, so he stops confessing the sins of his past. Immediately, the depression lifts and he experiences a vision of God in which he feels like God is downloading tremendous stores of theological knowledge into his soul. He cuts his hair and fingernails and accepts a jacket, proper pants and arrangements in Barcelona, all from the good people of Manresa, who, after eleven months of watching him and interacting with him, now call him "the holy man."

1991. St. Charles College. Grand Coteau, Louisiana. The carpeted fourth floor chapel isn't nearly as rough as the stone floors on which Iñigo slept in Manresa, and my blue jeans and Jesuit High swim team T-shirts are a far cry from Iñigo's sackcloth, but I do struggle with temptations and distractions as I undergo the *Spiritual Exercises.* In the second week, Iñigo's *Exercises* direct retreatants to imagine themselves in the towns where Jesus walked. Iñigo's instructions are to follow Jesus around as a young shepherd or a servant, to "know and love Jesus more closely." I close my eyes and try to picture the events of the gospel, but I feel like I'm sitting in a museum looking at paintings. I can't *feel* what is happening.

"Are you doing the preparatory prayers?" my novice master asks.

"The prayers, the composition of place, imagining the towns where he lived and worked. But it's just like the Bible's always been – a bunch of stories that have nothing to do with me. Is God punishing me for wacking off?"

"I think we know by now that's not how God operates."

Nobody discusses masturbation publicly. Some priests claim it is a natural, biological function and nothing to be worried about. Others claim it is possible to quit forever, to sublimate all sexual feelings into a radiant, spiritual love. In meditation, I ask God for the grace to quit

masturbation forever, even if I have to endure an epic, life-long battle requiring constant prayer, confession, and lost nights of sleep. But so far it hasn't worked out in my favor.

"Did Jesus masturbate? He must have at least had nocturnal emissions. Would those count as sins? If so, can we really say he was without sin?"

"Let's let Jesus worry about his sexuality. Just keep asking God for the grace to know and follow Jesus."

"But so many people use Jesus and the Christian faith for such crazy reasons."

"Like who?"

"Jimmy Swaggart, for one. And those Christian fundamentalists in the French Quarter who tell everyone they're going to hell. And maybe it's because I'm a guy, but it feels weak to ask God to help me love another guy, even if it is Jesus Christ."

"Sometimes weakness is strength, and that's exactly what Jesus showed us. So, keep asking for the grace, and maybe God will be good enough to give it to you."

After this conversation with the novice master, I go back to the fourth floor chapel, and after reading the passage where Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, I close my eyes and my imagination fades to black, like I'm in a movie theatre. Then everything changes, and I am there.

30 AD. Elizabeth's House. Galilee. Through the open window I gaze out at Venus shining brightly near the crescent moon at the horizon. Elizabeth, who welcomed us with wine and warmth the night before, is asleep with the other women in their section of the square, earthen house. The apostles are all spread out on the floor sound asleep, the air filled with deep breathing. My head still throbs from the wine, but I have this desire to get out to the desert and

find Jesus. I didn't follow him to his cousin's house just to party with him and his friends. I feel like he has something to teach me.

The desert sand is cool in the early morning, pleasant to walk on. Just as the first rays of the sun turn the sky from black to indigo, I feel Jesus' eyes on me. He is sitting alone on a mat. I plop myself down in the sand in front of him, and he doesn't say anything for a while. He just stares at me, with a kind look in his eyes.

"You want to learn to meditate?" he asks me.

"Yes," I say.

He nods his head.

"It's so simple," he says. "Breathe, and know that when you breathe in this air, you breathe in God. Invite God into your mind, asking him that his ways can be your ways. And as you breathe in, God will touch your heart."

I close my eyes and do what he says, feeling every part of me relax – my hands, my feet, my stomach, my lungs, my heart, and my mind. An infusion of what feels like pure light penetrates my chest, touching the pit of my stomach and the marrow of my bones. I feel loved and accepted exactly as I am. I look up at Jesus and sense his connection with God. God's energy pours out from his eyes into my whole being, warming my spirit like the rays of the rising sun warming my body, creating and sustaining the desert air, the sand, the fading stars, the rising sun, and the city just waking up.

1991. St. Charles College. Grand Coteau, Louisiana. I open my eyes, look at my watch, and realize an entire hour has passed in contemplation in the fourth floor chapel. Like

Iñigo in the cave at Manresa, I have received the grace of the second week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, and the grace continues each time I pray for one hour, four times per day.

Through the rest of the second week, I follow Jesus through the dusty towns around Galilee as he sits to dinner with prostitutes, gamblers, thieves and corrupt lawyers. Sometimes we encounter the real outcasts, people who make us shudder when they try to get close. Some stink so badly we can hardly keep our eyes open. They smell of rotting flesh, but they've heard about Jesus and want to talk to him. They seem beyond repair, not worth the trouble, and we try to shoo them away, but Jesus tells us to stop. He heals them.

Sometimes I am the one beyond healing. I try to stop praying and change the scene, to imagine myself as an old friend of Jesus instead, but God doesn't allow it. The contemplation stops like a film caught in the movie projector until I accept myself as the one with an affliction. Once I give in and let the scene flow, Jesus puts his healing hands on my head and sends his power running through me. I feel warmth running through places deep inside myself, places charged with fear. In some cases, Jesus is able to heal the wounds immediately. In other cases, he explains that his power will take years to work its full effect.

Between prayer periods I walk over carpets of pine needles beneath thick, towering rows of pine trees and remember, as a kid of eight, standing in the kitchen and looking up at Dad and asking him questions about God. Dad explains that the past, present and future are all one continuous present for God. I imagine it as one big movie screen that God watches lovingly, intervening when there is need, guiding those who will listen to the mysterious, divine voice, actively giving life to every living thing.

Chapter Nine

1996. St. Louis University. St. Louis, Missouri. I take off my shoes on the perfectly graded concrete and gravel walkway next to Elizabeth, near the fountain.

Immediately, childhood memories of walking barefoot through Traumerei on soft pine needles, hard tree roots, sharp oyster shells and mushy rotten boards fraught with rusty nails come rushing back.

1980. Traumerei. Slidell, Louisiana. I hear the high-pitched choirs of screaming cicadas rising and falling with the light breeze swaying the tall, skinny pine trees. I pull the amber husk of a shed cicada from the pine bark just as the cork at the end of my cane pole darts beneath the surface, dragged away by a slimy green sun perch.

"Let him set the hook," Grandpa tells me as I grab the pole and tug. "Don't pull too hard or he'll get away."

We fry the sun perch, skin and all, in a cast iron skillet next to a framed, crocheted sign that reads "Y'all come back now, ya here?" Its white flesh is sweet and tender, and its fried fins are crispy, like potato chips. The linoleum tile beneath our feet is cool, and if I never had to wear shoes again I swear I would be happy.

1996. St. Louis University. St. Louis, Missouri. "Don't you notice a difference?" Elizabeth asks, the light from the thin moon playing on her eyes, sparkling in the early evening air beneath the lid of a black baseball hat that proclaims, in white letters, "simple."

I step into the grass, the blades tickling the insoles of my feet, the cool dew awakening a fresh excitement about existing. I feel like a kid again.

"Why do we even wear shoes?" I say playfully, glad to be away from my uber-serious all-male Jesuit community. Why do we study so much, when the whole purpose of the Jesuit order is to spread the good news that God is among us, to help people access God through meditation? I imagine Saint Francis Xavier, after his fellow Basque, Iñigo de Loyola, has guided him through the full *Spiritual Exercises*.

1542. India. Francis Xavier walks avidly across India barefooted, his face beaming, the very picture of joy, having left all ambition for his own career in law and business back in the cold stone cities of Europe. He steps into Parvana, the village of pearl fishermen near Goa, smiling contagiously at the scrawny, indigent villagers. They wonder at his unbounded joy, at his splashing around in the salt water, making a fool of himself. The villagers laugh in delight. Who is this ragged stranger, who appears out of nowhere with such boundless energy, whose strength seems to come from the round white wafers he holds up so reverently? They imitate him, following his motions, repeating the exotic words spilling from his tongue, sharing somehow in the mystery of his happiness. It takes them away, if just for a moment, from the miserable, back-breaking drudgery of their daily work.

1996. St. Louis University. Seeing Elizabeth run her foot lightly over the grass blades jars me out of imagining Xavier.

"Because a lot of people make a lot of money on shoes," she says. "Because of convention, because of this whole Western industrial machine that keeps us wrapped like cellophane, unable to experience the earth that is dying to breathe beneath our feet."

"What about broken glass, and stickers in the grass?" I say, playing the devil's advocate.

"I walk barefoot all the time, and I never have any problems. We were made for it."

"We were also given the ability to make shoes."

"But why are we such slaves to them?"

"I don't know," I say, following her across the deep green grass of a field between the library and the gym. "But I think I'm going to walk barefoot more often."

I pull up a tiny tuft of grass between my toes, and remember Grandpa leading the Thanksgiving festivities in Traumerei, telling us he felt his father's presence there. Though I don't feel it, I trust he does, the same way a sailor who fights beside Grandpa on the destroyer in World War II trusts he will make it home alive, because every night Doctor Harris kneels down on the bow of the destroyer and prays.

"Do you really believe in God?" Elizabeth asks.

"Definitely," I say. "And not because of some abstract philosophical argument, but because I've experienced God."

"How can you say that?"

"Because I have. It's like this overwhelming force of love and acceptance. I don't understand it, but I choose to call it God, because mystics and theologians use that same word to reference similar experiences."

We cross beneath the protective, wrought iron arches of Saint Louis University, stepping out into the nearby neighborhoods, talking passionately, the glow of mutual affection becoming more obvious by the moment.

"I don't know," she says. "I think it's all a human construction, something people in authority made up so they could control us."

"Some people do use God to control other people, and I hate that, but that doesn't mean God doesn't exist."

"I might have experienced God once," she says. "We were in Norway, singing in this choir, and there was this storm not too far away, with thunder and lightning, and I remember there was this breeze, and I had this powerful, mysterious sense of a presence all around me, like I wasn't alone and everything was going to be all right."

"That sounds so much like God it's not funny."

"Maybe it was God," she says. "But I grew up Jewish, and why would we have different versions of God, if God really existed?"

"Did you go to the synagogue when you were younger?"

"Yeah."

"You learned about God through your religion and that's something to cherish. You should study it, maybe, get back to it and wrestle with it."

"I don't want to wrestle with it," she says, a fiery defiance burning in her eyes. "And you have no right to tell me I should."

"You're right," I say, backing down. "I'm sorry."

As we walk back towards campus, it begins to thunder.

"I better go," I say.

"I don't want you to."

"I don't either, but…"

Thunder booms above us, and a thick sheet of rain pours into the street. We run towards the overhang of a business closed for the night, happily looking at the blurry reflections of streetlights on the wet road. It feels like God wants us here, and I'm glad for the broad hiss of

millions of droplets on asphalt, the torrents pouring from the drainpipes, splashing onto the sidewalk in front of us, occasionally spraying our bare feet.

"I feel really comfortable with you," she says.

"Same here," I say. "You're really honest."

"Do you really have to be celibate to become a priest?"

"In the Catholic Church."

"It's not natural to deny your feelings."

"We don't deny our feelings, we just choose to respond to them differently."

"Like how? Denying they exist?"

"Channeling them in different directions. Sometimes the fight against injustice requires personal sacrifice. If I felt God was calling me to work in a war zone, or a dangerous inner-city neighborhood, I wouldn't feel right having a wife and family. What if I got killed?"

"That would be stupid," she says. "A total waste of a good life."

"Thanks, but…"

"Sometimes trying to fix things just makes them worse."

"Maybe in the short run, but in the long run that kind of sacrifice can wake people up."

"Some people will never wake up. Look at all the horrible things human beings are doing to the earth everywhere, and we're not learning our lessons. Like in Lake Victoria, in Africa."

She tells me how the British introduced the Nile perch, a nice big, meaty fish to Lake Victoria so they could harvest them and make a lot of money on the international markets. But the perch feed on chichlids, which eat the algae in the lake and used to be eighty percent of the

lake's biomass. With no cichlids to keep the algae under control, the lake that used to feed millions of people is turning into a giant, stinking sewerage pit.

"That's like the wetlands in Louisiana," I say, telling her how the levees meant to protect crops and cities from the Mississippi River's annual floods have, along with oil pipelines and canals, contributed to the loss of 30 square miles of wetlands per year. Without the millions of tons of silt from the river's floods, the wetlands sink, making it easier for the Gulf's salty waters to seep into canals built by the oil companies, like poison seeping into thousands of little veins. The salt water kills plants and trees whose roots keep the soil in place, then licks at the land until it washes away into the Gulf, depriving New Orleans and other coastal cities of a desperately needed buffer from hurricane storm surges.

"Things would be better if people acted more in tune with nature, don't you think?" Elizabeth says.

She looks directly into my eyes, and part of me thinks she's right. Maybe the solution is "simple," just like her hat says. Maybe that's the problem with Western philosophy, that it overly complicates things. Maybe that's the problem with the vows, with the Roman Catholic Church. But I'm not ready to think about that, especially not with Elizabeth so close to me. The rain lets up.

"Guess we should go," I say.

"You first."

I sprint, barefooted, back to Bellarmine House through a light, cool rain, shouting good-bye to Elizabeth. As I round the corner, I hear her faint good-bye echo back against the wet pavement.

Chapter Ten

1996. Bayou Black. Houma, Louisiana. Elizabeth sits in the boat's stern, gazing at the endless tapestry of cypress trees reaching up from Bayou Black towards the baby blue sky behind her. The wind presses her hair flat as a nun's habit, the long white wake stretching behind her like a veil. I am dying to touch her fingertips, the ones she uses to pull the black carbon steel trigger of a .357 Smith and Wesson, blasting cattails and sending gators easing back beneath the black, swampy waters. Those fingertips, which she pressed to my lips in the shadow of the stark, monolithic Mason temple back in Saint Louis, now rest on her short pants just below her exposed knees, above the immaculate white fiberglass deck. I will draw those fingertips in pastel, again and again on Strathmore carbon paper, in the barbershop turned artist's studio on the fourth floor of Grand Coteau, as if putting them to paper will make this thorny gate over my heart - the one that protects me and this religious life so well and repels Elizabeth - disappear.

The blazing auburn sun sinks into the watery horizon. I drive Elizabeth back along the crumbling, ever-sinking highway from Bayou Black to my parents' house in New Orleans, rolling down the windows so she can hear the frog symphonies rising up from the swamps along the way.

I lie in my childhood bed alone, knowing that after tomorrow I will never see Elizabeth again. What my parents think of this Yankee Jewish girl from Wisconsin, who brings them fine chocolates, an innocent gift that only deepens my parents' confusion at the return of their son, I don't know. But I've heard my maternal grandmother's bourbon-soaked voice declare that New York City Jews have taken over the media and are taking over the world, and when I am thirteen Mom prevents me from attending my swimming buddy Sheira's bat mitzvah. I wonder if she

hears me climbing the spiral, wrought-iron staircase to the guest room where Elizabeth is staying at midnight.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Elizabeth asks, lying beneath the pink flowery print of my parents' guest bedroom sheets.

Her hesitant voice sounds so different from the last night in St. Louis, when, in the shadow of the mason temple, her tear drops fell to her faded red jacket, making dark splotches the color of blood.

Three weeks earlier. Mason Temple, across the street from St. Louis University. I feel her lips against mine, only for a moment, and then I pull away.

"Longer. That wasn't enough to really feel them."

"You're killing me," I say, imagining the Jesuits in our Victorian house down the street pointing to their watches, frowning at each other, thinking, "Still with that girl."

"Just five seconds," she says.

Defying the gravity of our two worlds tugging us apart, we hold our lips together long enough for me to feel the full contour of hers, long enough to feel how perfectly we fit together. I cherish this moment, like the old monk in the Zen fable who carries the naked woman through the forest, so he won't hold her in his mind forever afterwards. But I am a young monk, and God has not given me the grace to live chastity like the angels.

"Wes, wait," she says as I leave her alone next to the box elders outside the mason temple. I am fifteen yards away when she calls me again.

"Please, it's our last night together."

I walk back to her and we stand close, holding each other for hours, talking deep into the night. In the confines of my room down the street, in a plastic file box, is a picture she cut out from a magazine and sent with one of her letters. In the picture, a warm orange hearth light pours from a cabin on a lake in the northern woods, just before sunset. I feel that warm light between us, but I can't tell her that. I have to push her away.

"You're going to do great things," I say. "I can feel it."

"You don't know that," she says.

"I do. You're so passionate, so bright. The way you take in every detail. But I can't believe you're a marine biology major and you've never been to Louisiana. You need to see the wetlands."

I have no doubt that her presence in this world is a gift that God does not want me to miss, and yet, when her fingertips touch my cheek, in my parents' guest bedroom in New Orleans, my heart freezes.

Three weeks later. Metairie, Louisiana.

"Are you all right?" she asks.

"Let's just hold each other," I say.

"Okay," she says, putting her head on my chest, as though this will dissolve the barbs so deeply enmeshed in my feeling center, periodically emitting their poison.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she says, but I can hear the disappointment, and I feel my jaw tightening in anger. Until now, I've seen the vows as a vehicle for personal freedom. I've had to cut

relationships with several women because perpetual chastity wouldn't let us push further. Though it has been challenging to deny my desire for intimate female companionship, afterwards I've felt mostly relief. But this time feels different. For the first time in five years of religious life, I resent the vows.

I want to be faithful to the public sacrifice I have made, but I can't deny the spirit of love. If I go out and conquer the world for God but burn with angry resentment because I can't love a woman like Elizabeth, what good am I to anyone? She reminds me of the infectious zest for the moment that has led me this far in the spiritual life, the pure joy of loving that has slowly evaporated over the course of this year of living with twenty guys with whom I feel so little in common. I am tired of arguing over abstract points that have no apparent effect on the problems this world desperately needs all-hands-on-deck to solve now.

Is Elizabeth just a temptation to change course, because my prayer has turned dry, as it did for Iñigo as he struggled through eight years of Latin and philosophy studies? Or will re-kindling my heart require me to leave religious life? I ponder all of this as I lie here with Elizabeth, unable to move, unable to speak.

In the morning she leaves, and I can tell by the distance she keeps between us the next morning, and the absence of her usual smile, that I have effectively doused the embers of our relationship with my freeze-up the night before. I hold out hope that God will make sense of all of it, giving me the same mystical grace he gave Iñigo. With that grace, this will all seem like just a curve in the path. In the meantime, Elizabeth's magnetism has unearthed a wound from the past that I must attend either way, if I am to move forward in the spiritual life.

Chapter Eleven

1991. Fourth Floor Chapel. Grand Coteau, Louisiana.

I look at my watch again, thinking thirty minutes must have gone by, but it's only been five minutes.

"All right Lord," I say. "What the fuck?"

I scramble to my knees and open my arms wide.

"You want me to beg? Okay. I'm begging."

I press my forehead to the floor, rocking back and forth like a Muslim facing Mecca.

"Please please please please please please. Please give me the grace to feel sorrow for Jesus in his suffering. Please."

I open to the scripture passage, for the sixth time in three days, where the disciples take the bloody body of Jesus down from the cross. I try to help them, but it's like it's been in every prayer period this third week of the retreat. Like watching the news on TV. I'm miles away, and there's nothing I can do about it.

"This makes absolutely no sense," I say out loud. "Why the hell would you send Jesus, supposedly you're only son, let me get so close to him, and then take it all away?"

I close my eyes again and feel a wave of quiet descend over me, like God has turned on a switch, and my mind goes blank.

33. AD. Safe House. Jerusalem. I'm there with the apostles in a dimly lit room, wiping down the dead body of Jesus with a cloth soaked in perfume. Though I feel that I have betrayed them, that I left right when things got rough, they don't say anything. They help me, pouring more perfume on the cloth when it runs low, keeping his limp, lifeless limbs in place with great

care. As I clean the flecks of dried blood from the cuts left by the Roman soldier's whips, the bluesy section of "Jesus is Just All Right," by the Doobie Brothers, plays.

My whole body shrinks, and the cloth becomes a huge mop. I clean the gashed heart of Jesus like a janitor mopping the floors of a school cafeteria, weeping and remembering the times I spent with him during the second week. I can't believe he is dead. He did so much for me, bringing light to dark, painful places in my heart that I didn't even know existed. Tears fall from my cheeks onto his heart, and I use them to mop his wounds.

1991. Fourth floor chapel. Grand Coteau, Louisiana. After what feels like hours of crying and cleaning, I look at my watch and discover that forty-five minutes have passed. Praying over the suffering and death of Jesus, even when the grace of sorrow had come, is exhausting.

"What the hell is God's problem?" I ask the novice master when we meet at the end of the third week, surprised at my own anger, but unable to control it. "He wants me to feel bad because his son died for me? Okay. I feel bad. But it makes no fucking sense why his son had to die in the first place. Why would he let me know Jesus, even start feeling like we're friends, and then his own dad lets him die like a dog in the street."

"I want you to trust God, to get up at midnight and pray this passage."

"Why midnight? I haven't gotten up at midnight this whole retreat. Nothing's going to happen, anyway, so what's the use?"

"Just do it. God has given you every grace you have asked for on this retreat, and now the grace is 'to feel joy with Jesus at his rising from the dead.'"

When my alarm rouses me from bed at midnight, I'm still sulking. I'm tired of begging God for graces. The last thing I want is to ask God for the grace of joy at the resurrection of Jesus. I don't even think it can happen, because I don't believe Jesus was resurrected.

When I look at the list of prayer passages for the day, I realize that the first two are selections from the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The exercise I'm supposed to use for prayer involves my being there when Jesus appears to his mother, before any of the disciples. *"Was Iñigo hallucinating when he wrote this down?"* I think. *"In scripture, Jesus appeared to just about everybody else, but not to his mother."*

Despite my doubts, I sit in my chair at my desk, waiting for something to happen. The night is still. Even the crickets seem to have gone to sleep. Around me is a small bed, a closet, a sink, a wooden desk and chair, and an artist's rendering of Jesus on the wall, Jesus when he was still alive and well.

Before I can even finish the preparatory prayer, before I realize what was happening, I am in the scene.

AD 33. Mary's house. Nazareth. The only sound in this early morning hour is Mary sobbing quietly, asking God why this had to happen to her son. I am her servant, standing helplessly by, wondering the same thing. I reach my hand out and put it on her shoulders, and then he appears.

He stands in front of her, holding her hands.

Then I am Jesus, wearing ephemeral white robes and feeling this tremendous power flowing through me, knowing that I've been through death and seen the face of God. I am stunned and wonder if I'm being proud, but I realize it isn't up to me. So I flow with the power

and feel myself lifted up. The light is cleaner and purer than anything I've experienced in prayer before, running through the wounds I can see in my hands. I feel my hands in Mary's and I know what it means to her that I am alive.

I laugh with joy. Tears ran down my cheeks and the force running through me grows stronger and lifts me higher. I am stunned by the great joy I feel, the sense that God loves me beyond words. I have been given the gift of knowing the divine family in a very personal way, so personally that I have become one with it. My friend and teacher, Jesus has not only returned from the dead, but he lives inside of me. And I live inside of him. His hands are my hands! His wounds are my wounds. I have lived through the same sense of abandonment he experienced, and I have come through it, just like he came through it.

1991. Grand Coteau, Louisiana. The fourth week passes quickly, and suddenly I am sitting down on a bench under an oak tree for the final prayer period of the retreat, "The Contemplation to Attain Divine Love." I imagine the resurrected Jesus, now the Christ, present in all the rocks, trees, rivers, oceans, mountains and cities teeming with people, and I imagine him making all things new. I feel that presence, the divine love, running through me and connecting me to all things, and I feel a deep sense of abiding peace that all is well in the world.

Greyhound Bus. Arkansas-Oklahoma Border. Wide awake, I watch the pitch-black sky shifting outside the confinement of the itchy Greyhound bus seat, high above the rolling Ozark foothills. Two days ago, I finished the long retreat, and now, like Iñigo, walking north from his cave at Manresa on foot towards Barcelona and the Holy Land, I roll north along the rural highway 71 towards Saint Benedict's Abby in Atchison, Kansas, thanking God for the world

outside my window now blanketed in darkness. Though I won't beg for food or visit the sick, as Iñigo does on the road to plague-ridden Barcelona, I know that, despite appearances to the contrary, the world is charged with divine light, and I can almost see it through the window. The rocks, trees, rivers, oceans, mountains and beyond them, cities teeming with people are all created and sustained, in this moment, by divine love running through all of us.

During the retreat, I journeyed back in time two thousand years to meet the son of God, walking the dusty streets of Nazareth. In the absolute silence of Grand Coteau, where every meal and a comfortable bed was provided, all I had to do was pray. I closed my eyes and I was with Jesus, dining with him, betraying him, being healed by him, denying him, bathing his wounds and burying him. After his death, I hid with the others and tried to console his mother. He appeared, changed by death, light streaming from him. Then I was him, transformed by the light streaming through his wounds that were now my wounds, a deep sense of abiding peace that I was one with everything and all was well.

Then I boarded this Greyhound bus in a crowded station in Opelousas, Louisiana, knowing with every fiber of my being that Jesus is still present with these fellow Greyhound travelers. The migrant Mexican workers, the old black man who sits in the back corner drinking whiskey, hitting on the white, middle-aged woman who confides in me that she has been riding these busses for months, sleeping with any man she can find, anyone who will give her enough money to continue the journey. My novice master calls this journey the pilgrimage, promising us that this long, solitary bus ride, that takes each of us five novices to a monastery in a different corner of the country, will put us back in the real world, where we must keep our eyes open to find Jesus in the poor. The poor travel on Greyhound busses, and if, like Iñigo, we want to find

God on our pilgrimage, we must, like him, shed the wealth and privilege we enjoyed before entering the Jesuits.

We hit downtown Fort Smith, the second largest city in Arkansas with a population of 80,000 souls, at 3:00 AM.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen. Fort Smith. Three-thirty sharp, this bus leaves for Kansas City. That's thirty minutes from now."

"Just enough time to stretch my legs a bit, take a meditative walk," I think, still in the retreat mode, feeling like the whole world is charged with God's glory. I stroll down the dark streets of downtown Fort Smith, past a hardware store closed for the night as though I'm sauntering past the blooming camellia bushes on the prayer paths in Grand Coteau. I walk for ten minutes, reflecting on God's presence in these very streets, in gratitude for the handiwork that crushed these stones and spread the resulting concrete into neatly designed blocks, the beauty of the quiet store windows, where tomorrow people will continue their life's work, their sacred function on this earth. I say a prayer for them, enjoying the cold wind blowing from the north, my destination.

As I walk back towards the bus station I hear a car slowing down behind me. I feel my heart pounding in my ears, racing, my legs involuntarily picking up pace despite my efforts to slow them, using the little will power I have with the adrenalin pumping through my veins, to keep looking straight ahead, ignoring the car now beside me. I am almost a hundred percent certain that, when I look over, I will see a gun pointed at me. I put my hand inside my coat to make it look like I have a gun, too. In the fear and adrenaline of the moment, all thoughts of being with Jesus, of being poor and trusting God, flee to a remote corner of my mind, like refugees before the onslaught of war.

When I glance quickly through the open passenger window, there is a man, probably mid-30s, rough shaven, sitting alone in a shiny, pimped up Oldsmobile. An overgrown goatee. A dirty baseball cap.

"Want a blowjob, boy?" he asks in thick, Ozark-infused twang.

The streetwise New Orleanian in me takes over, as fierce as a cornered weasel taking on a rattlesnake.

"I got a .38 in this coat, pal," I say. "And I'm ready to use it. So if I were you, I'd get the fuck out of here."

He looks shocked, even a little sad.

"Fuck you," he says, and drives off.

My heart races, amazed that I have so easily warded off what could have been a much uglier encounter, and hurry back to the bus to find my seat. I gradually catch my breath, but I can still feel the blood pumping through my hands, childhood memories flooding back, the sun shining through live oak branches as I park my bike outside the man's gate, with my two younger brothers and our friend, who says he knows the man who lives here and it's okay for us to swim.

1982. The man's pool. Metairie, Louisiana. I am nine years old. I want to kill the man whose whiskers I can still feel pressing against me. I want to tear off his head and crush his skull. I still smell the chlorine of his pool and the chill in his house, and the intense feelings I have watching the beautiful woman on screen, giving the nerdy guy a blow job. The man asks if we have hard-ons, and if he can see. I show him mine in front of the other guys, and I want to kill myself for doing it afterwards. But the porno mesmerizes us, seeping into our veins like

morphine, altering the connections in our susceptible little brains. Afterwards, promising us we will get to see more, he calls me in with him alone, showing me another clip. The man stops the tape and rewinds it to the beginning. Waves of pleasure wash over me, far beyond my power to make any sense of it.

"Let me see your hard-on again," he says.

"No," I say.

"Come on," he says. "We're alone now. Nobody else will know."

"Okay, but you better not tell my friends."

"Don't worry," he says. "You can trust me."

I show him my hard-on and he gets very close.

"You want me to give you a blow job?" he asks.

"No!" I say, pulling my underwear back up. He shows me the rest of the porno. I feel the burning again as the nerd on screen moans louder and louder, then comes.

"That's his semen," the man says. "She loves semen."

The man stops the tape and asks if I want to see his penis. He shows it and touches it. He asks me if I want to taste semen.

"I want to know what it tastes like," I say. "But I don't want to taste yours."

"Do you want a blow job?" he asks.

"No," I say.

"Didn't it look good in the movie?"

"Yes," I say.

"Let me see your dick."

Immediately after I pull down my pants, I wish I hadn't. I wish I'd gotten on my bike and ridden away with my younger brothers. I feel so stupid, but it feels far better than anything I've experienced in my life, the thrills of pleasure rippling through every inch of my whole body. I put my hands on his face and feel the sharp prick of his whiskers, trying to push him away. I want to hit him, to make him stop. I want to kill him. But I am nine years old and he is 35.

"What's wrong?" he says. "Doesn't that feel good?"

"No," I say. "You're gay. You're going to hell."

"I'm not gay," he says. "I had two girls in here last night."

"Really?" I say, confused, imagining him in bed with the two girls in the movie, trying to reconcile this thought with what he is doing now.

"This isn't right. It's premarital sex and that's a sin."

He laughs. "Oh come on. Doesn't it feel good?"

"No," I say.

"Now you're lying. It's not right to lie."

"Okay," I say. "It does. But that doesn't make it right."

He sucks again, and I feel the fight in me draining away. I still try to push him away, but I lied about feeling good. I lost the argument.

"Don't tell anyone about this," he says as I quickly put on my underwear and shorts. "Especially your parents. Got it?"

He doesn't have to tell me. I'm already too ashamed to admit it even happened. I hurry past my friends without saying anything and jump on my bike. I still feel the burn of pleasure as I ride back to the country club, shaking with shame. I feel older. I feel like a killer. The burn turns to shame, implanted like napalm jelly, burning off every inch of my innocence.

When I get to the club, though I want to crash my bike into the tree near the bike rack, I decide that I should control every movement, so nobody thinks anything is wrong. I go straight to the bathroom, and hands shaking, pull down my pants. They are on backwards. I quickly turn them around, trying not to look at them.

When I leave the locker room, I step up to the pool deck, feeling the eyes of the lifeguards and my swim team friends on me. It feels like they are staring holes through me, like they can see what happened. I tear off my clothes and dive to the bottom of the pool, where I hold on to the heavy bars of the drain, testing whether I have the guts to drown myself.

1991. Greyhound Bus. Fort Smith, Arkansas. For nine years I've held that secret close to me. Whenever my brothers joke around, pretending to be gay, I explode in a rage, knocking them down and punching them until they start crying. I keep my feelings as hidden as possible, breaking down every once in a while and spilling them in the confessional, or alone with a girl, or in a drunken moment with a very close friend, but I have never spoken of this with anyone.

Nine years later I sit on this bus to Kansas City, ashamed that I have so quickly forgotten what I learned on my long retreat, ashamed to be remembering what happened when I was nine, still feeling like it was my fault, still wanting to kill the man who did this to me. I know I will have to tell the novice master when I get back to the novitiate, as difficult as it will be to speak out the memories and emotions overtaking me at this moment. The novice master will make me work through it, and already, as I look back at what just happened on the street in Fort Smith, I see that I must work through it if I am to move forward in the spiritual life. The Fort Smith redneck was more pitiful than dangerous. Were I a saint, perhaps I would have said: "No thanks, but I'd be happy to speak with you about God."

I am still shaking with rage 30 minutes after it happened, still scared.

A week later, after chanting prayers in the Gregorian style three times a day with the monks of Saint Benedict, a fortress of Kansas limestone perched on bluffs overlooking the Missouri River, I return to Grand Coteau and recount the whole experience to The novice master, saving the blow job offer in Fort Smith and the memory of being molested when I was a kid for last.

"How often did it happen?" he asks.

"Once," I say, trying to downplay it. "It wasn't that big a deal."

"Better that a millstone be tied around his neck."

"What's that?"

"What Jesus said. Better that he be thrown to the bottom of the sea with a millstone around his neck, than to bring scandal to these little ones. That son of a bitch screwed you up."

"Well, it was only once, and I think I'm over it," I lie, hoping that airing it out will instantly dissolve it.

"Why don't you spend some time praying to God for the grace to forgive the man who did that to you."

After spending some unpleasant moments praying over the incident, I think of my two brothers who were with me that day. I call them immediately, and can feel their discomfort as I recount that day's events.

"They were smart enough to leave that day," I think. "Why should they have to deal with my mistakes?"

Then I tell my parents. Mom cries.

"Why didn't you tell us?" she asks. "Were you afraid Daddy would go kill the guy?"

"I guess so," I say. "I guess I felt like it was my fault."

"Well," she says. "It definitely wasn't your fault."

I can hear how terrible she feels, that she didn't do enough to protect me, and that makes me feel worse.

"Have you prayed to forgive him?" she asks. "The best thing is to forgive and forget."

"I know, Mom," I say angrily, well aware that the reason I don't tell them, when I am nine years old, isn't because of what Dad might do to the man. It's because of what he might do to me. Even as I talk about it on the phone nine years later, as an eighteen year old, I am still worried my parents will think I'm a pervert, or just trying to get sympathy. I don't want to play the victim, but I do want to heal a wound that is, quite obviously, still affecting how I relate to the world.

The novice master, Father Fran Pistorius, agrees that if I truly want to progress in the spiritual life, it is absolutely imperative that I discover, uncover and heal any hidden wounds that might stand in the way between me and God. Fran, a slightly overweight man of medium height whose pock-marked face turns bright red when he gets angry, is passionate about forming novices of the Society of Jesus in the mold of Iñigo de Loyola.

Some novices call Fran "Father Pissedofferus" behind his back, because they think he gets angry too often. I'm happy for his passion. Novitiate, for Fran, is a complete spiritual, mental, intellectual, and in some cases, physical overhaul, and Fran understands the hard work it takes to convert one's heart and mind to an active love of God. On the first day of novitiate, he holds Mass at a crumbling shelter in the middle of a cow field in Grand Coteau, where he tells us: "Each one of you has made a tremendous leap of faith by leaving your families and your jobs to follow where you feel God is leading you, and I'm grateful for your generosity and your

courage. It isn't always easy to follow your heart, and you're going to have doubts. You're going to be tested in ways you can't imagine right now, and some of you will find that God is calling you to another path. But right now, God is calling us here in this moment to be present, to recognize that we have been given the tremendous gift of life, talent, and the desire to contribute something greater to the world."

As I listen to him on the rotting porch of that shelter, preaching in the heat and the buzz of wasps and carpenter bees, I am moved by his authenticity. In the jittery movement of his hands, I can almost see his years of sacrifice, as if he has already climbed the mountain, braved cold winters alone, and come back to prepare us for it. Listening to him brings quiet, warm tears to my eyes.

Two years later, during our last summer of novitiate, Fran calls me into his office a month before we are scheduled to take perpetual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in a chapel packed with family and friends, and tells me he wants me to see a psychologist.

"But Fran, you said I was making progress."

"You are. A psychologist could help you in ways I can't."

"What ways? I've never been happier. Novitiate has been the most amazing time of growth."

"Some of the guys are concerned about you. They say you've burst into tears a few times in the past week."

"I'm sad to leave novitiate."

"Doctor Lawrence is a nice guy. He's easy to talk to."

Though one of my favorite movies is *Ordinary People*, about the relationship between a high school kid and a psychologist, I've heard Mom declare that psychologists are quacks doing the devil's work.

"Is it any wonder they have a higher suicide rate than any other professionals?" she says. "Why would you go air out all your laundry in front of some doctor, when you could just as easily do in with a priest, in the hushed secrecy of the confessional, where all your sins would automatically be forgiven and grace would be given a chance to work? What do charlatans know about God's grace?"

The psychologist is a nice guy and lets me sit in a comfortable leather chair in a quiet, peaceful office. He asks simple questions.

"Middle of seven children. Okay. So, tell me more about what you're experiencing."

"I was molested when I was a kid, but I think I've forgiven the guy. And I started drinking at a really young age. And I used to vandalize stuff when I was like eleven. Maybe I'm angry or something deep down inside. Or sad. I don't know."

I try to tell him the darkest secrets I possibly can, so he can figure out the problems, help me fix them, and I can move on with my life.

"How young with the drinking?"

"Eleven. I mean, that's the first time I puked. I got a buzz once when I was eight, but anyway. Novitiate has been amazing, and I feel like I've really grown up, and it's just really hard to think about moving on already. Fran's worried about me, but I'm fine. Just a little emotional."

"Why are you here?"

"Good question. Fran told me to come, so I'm here, and I'm doing my absolute best to tell you the darkest stuff so it can heal."

At the end of the session, he gives me a sheet of paper the size of a business card that says: "Even if things don't go the way I want them to, I can still be happy." He tells me to post the card on my mirror and read it five times every day. I toy with this idea, briefly, but when I actually post it on my mirror it looks so stupid, so much like Stuart Smally on Saturday Night Live, that I crumble it up and throw it away.

"I've been trained in prayer and meditation for two years. What difference will a silly little card make when I already have a spiritual director, and more importantly, when I have direct access to God in prayer?"

Fran isn't impressed with my arguments and orders me to continue therapy on a weekly basis until vow day, August 15th, 1993. I do, and though I feel better after each session I also passive aggressively decide to avoid any further problems until vow day by turning off my emotions, like a faucet.

Chapter Twelve

1993. Sister Miranda's Convent. Omaha, Nebraska. To discuss sex, what more safe haven can there be than a nun? But Sister Miranda, the first nun with whom I feel comfortable sharing my feelings, is taking comfort with sexuality to an unprecedented level.

"Don't be afraid," Sister Miranda says as I lay down on the massage table, every muscle growing tenser until the moment I feel her hands on my back. "God is here and everything is okay."

Her fingers press deep into my knotted shoulders, releasing the floodgates of my pent-up anxiety, letting the tension and fear flow out, re-opening the emotional faucet I turned off during the last month of novitiate leading up to vow day, only two months earlier. While tears streamed down other novices' faces as we knelt side by side at the altar, giving homage to Christ present in the communion host Fran held in front of us, and several novices choked up, I called my vows out loudly, with all the emotion of an android: "Almighty and eternal God, I, James Wesley Harris, though altogether most unworthy in your divine sight… vow to Your Divine Majesty perpetual poverty, chastity and obedience in the Society of Jesus; and I promise that I shall enter the same Society in order to lead my entire life in it…"

Two days later, I flew away from lush, semi-tropical New Orleans where dancing in the streets to Afro-Caribbean Mardi Gras beats sets the tone for a way of life. I landed in the dry plains of Omaha, Nebraska, where the value of work so dominates the culture, it seems that people have forgotten how to socialize, or even talk. My welcome from the house minister, the priest in charge of hospitality and food supplies, arrived one week into my stay, in the form of a typewritten note: "There's no milk. That's not good."

1993. Campion House. Omaha, Nebraska. I am the house shopper, and as such my duty is to make sure there is milk in the refrigerator. This is the only thing the minister says to me for two years. I lock up my feelings, already carefully stowed to prevent the kinds of tearful messes that cause Fran to send me to a psychologist, even tighter.

Shutting down my emotions threatens to block the intellectual and cultural opportunities our superior, Greg Carlson, a sandy-haired, athletic guy with razor-sharp wit, provides for our international community. We are a diverse group of young guys, our average age about tweny-three years old. We are two Nigerians, two Vietnamese from the California province, a Chilean, a Puerto Rican, and six Anglos from different parts of the country.

When I ask for time with Greg, he invites me on a jog through downtown. We hammer out issues with Latin verb conjugations, our spiritual lives, and class schedules as we dart between parked cars, dodge buses, and cut past the Campbell's soup factory, climbing steps to the magnificent park along the riverfront. Greg passionately extols literature and the arts as worthy of study in and of themselves. We study humanities for more than just the wisdom and insight they offer us as young men training to become priests. Artists and writers appreciate every type of human moment, and as men dedicated to following Christ our job is to love humanity in all its guises.

On the second day of our orientation at Campion House, Greg introduces us to the poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a 19th century English Jesuit. The poem is a rallying cry for the staff at Campion House, who dedicate themselves to carrying on the last remaining humanities program for Jesuits in the country. Until the 1960s, humanities studies as preparation for priesthood focused on ancient Latin and Greek, since the New Testament was originally written in Greek, and theology classes were still taught in Latin. The

dying embers of the Roman Empire were carried on the tongues of these men who spoke Latin every day, keeping the rigid and unyielding structure of the Church alive. But it finally died when the Second Vatican council allowed priests to celebrate Mass in the "vulgar" languages (as opposed to Latin), and the study of humanities gradually phased out. Several years after I finish studying at Campion House, it is shut down, ending centuries of tradition.

We are fortunate to enjoy those last great moments, with Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem as the starting point for our studies:

> "…Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
> Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
> Selves- goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
> Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*
> …For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> To the Father through the features of men's faces."

Our quest to find Christ present in ten thousand faces finds its first challenge in an assignment to view the lithographs and posters of Toulouse-Lautrec, the 19th century French artist, at the Joslyn Art Museum in downtown Omaha. I wrestle with my disgust at Toulouse-Lautrec's depictions of bawdy, half-nude women who look depressed and drunk. Their clothes are painted in mustard yellow and shit brown, and the men wear clownish, sad-looking baggy clothes. As we discuss the paintings in our weekly seminars, I learn to appreciate Lautrec's realism and his passion for the worlds he inhabits.

My tastes expand further when I attended my first symphony with Skeeter, a scholastic from Wyoming. I've heard how cacophonous and disorienting modern music can be, and as soon as the lights go down my ears revolt. Every instrument sounds out of tune, and there seems to be no rhyme or reason to the clash of noises filling the elegant symphony hall.

I turn to Skeeter, “What the hell is this modern shit? I’m getting out of here!” I am almost out of my seat when I notice Skeeter laughing.

“Calm down, Cowboy,” he says. “They’re just warming up.”

“What?”

“They haven’t started the concert yet. They’re just tuning their instruments.”

“Oh.”

These exercises in humanity slowly begin to thaw my feelings, locked up so tightly, and when I meet Sister Miranda I hope that her friendship will be a safe outlet for expressing my true emotions.

Despite my worry that perhaps Sister Miranda is not quite as trustable as I first imagined, her massage has its intended effect. Electric energy runs from her hands to my shoulders, and as she presses into the tense muscles along my vertebrae, the knots in my shoulders loosen, giving way to waves of relaxation. After several minutes, I relax so much that I decide to take off my shirt.

She moves down my spine and sinks her fingertips into the pressure points along my lower back. The pleasure builds with each touch of her fingers.

She kisses my back, her kisses growing wetter as she approaches my belt line, then stops, pulling my jeans and underwear down slightly, smoothing out the lines on my skin. Then she continues kneading my muscles, and the pleasure grows more intense. I am aware of the connection between Sister Miranda’s fingertips on my back and the sexual pleasure, and though I try to reason with myself that I should cut the massage short and leave, I can’t fight it. I am too

relaxed, and the pleasure too great. She keeps pressing, and the pleasure grows until I can't contain it another moment.

At first I can't think, the release is so sublime. I don't care that my jeans are getting wet, or that I'm in a convent. My mind is blank except for the blanket of satisfaction washing over me. Sister Miranda feels my muscles tightening and stops massaging for a moment. I am sure she knows what happened, that she can feel my muscles pulsating. Perhaps she even intended it. But her motives don't matter to me. Nothing matters until the cloud of sensual thrill clears. Even as I stop coming, my reasoning mind returns like a sobered drunk.

I jump up from the table in panic.

"I gotta go!" I say.

"What?" she says. "What's wrong? I thought you were staying late."

"I have to go. I can't believe this. I'm such an idiot."

I look down at my pants as I rush down the hall, Sister Miranda right next to me. The large, growing dark spot on my jeans makes me think of the elderly nun at the front door, who checked me in earlier that evening, writing my name in the book with the time and date I arrived.

"Can we go out another way besides the front door?"

"Sure, Wesley. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. We just can't do this anymore."

"Call me tomorrow," she says. "We'll talk about it."

I'm not about to call her. We are right on the cusp of sex, and who's to say we haven't already done it?

She calls me the next night, her voice hoarse and sensual.

"Why don't you tell me what happened last night?"

"I'm so stupid," I say. "I shouldn't even be talking to you right now."

"Don't be so rash, Wesley. It's okay."

"No, it's not."

"You're holding on too tight. If you talk about it, I promise you will feel better."

"It's not that easy."

"I think I know what happened."

"You do?"

"I taught sex education for seventeen years."

"You did?"

"The human body is an amazing gift from God. So complex, so interconnected."

"Oh."

When I finally tell her I came, she sounds thrilled.

"You ejaculated! That's wonderful."

"Wonderful?"

"God gave you your penis. Can you say 'penis' without feeling ashamed?"

"Can we not talk about this?"

"You'll feel better if you say it. Say, 'penis,' and then say 'vagina.' They're totally natural, you know."

"Okay," I grumble. "Penis. Vagina. There, I said it."

"Doesn't it feel better now?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I really like having a… penis. And I'm glad you have a…vagina. It's great. I like feeling alive and all that, it's just…"

"Just what?"

"Well, I mean, I was taught they are bad. That I'm bad for using words like that and that I shouldn't have sex unless I'm married. And I'm a religious, you know? I don't think I can go to the party next week."

"Okay," she says softly. I can hear the hurt in her voice.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I'm not sure what's going on. And I don't want us to get any closer. It's dangerous."

When Sister Miranda calls the next time, I tell the scholastic who answers the phone to tell her I'm not home. And when she comes to dinner, as the guest of the house minister, I don't even look at her. At the end of the night, she catches me by surprise.

"Wesley. I never see you anymore," she says, a seductive grin on her face. "It's like you disappeared."

"Yep," I say. "I guess I did."

After that night, I never see her again.

Chapter Thirteen

1998. Camp Thunderhead. Mercer, Wisconsin. Grums plows ahead of me, cutting a trail in the freshly fallen white powder, topping off the foot-thick carpet of ice and snow that blankets these northern woods of Wisconsin, just a few miles from Michigan's upper peninsula. Sliding one skinny ski in front of the other, taking in deep draughts of dry air infused with fir and spruce, I relish the burning of my quadriceps, working to keep pace with Grums' icy track. I watch him disappear past the shredded white bark of a set of birch trees, and moments later, careening downhill towards him, I lose balance, watching my skis scrunch together, dig into the snow, and throw me face-first into a snow bank. Grums' belly laugh echoes through the silent glen where he stands steady on his skis, in good shape for a priest in his mid-40s, who spends most of his time in the office.

"Not bad for a Southern boy," he says, his hand on his belly.

"It's kind of refreshing," I say, digging snow out of my ears and wiping it from the inside of my hat.

He laughs again, a few hours later, watching me prop my hands beneath my lower back, pushing my feet high in the air, showing off my latest yoga moves after eating leftovers that Grums methodically packed in the freezer, in used Ziploc bags, the night before.

"You've got to breathe, boy," he says gently. "Remember?"

"I am breathing," I say.

He shakes his head as I drop my toes to the ground behind my head, stretching out my shoulders.

"Put your hand on your belly," he says. "Now. Do you feel your belly go up when you breathe in?"

"No."

"Then you're not breathing."

"Oh," I say, trying it again.

"If you fill your belly with air first, your diaphragm opens up. That's how we were made to breathe, nice and deep. But we grow up and get nervous and next thing you know, our breath gets shallow, all up in the lungs, and we think that's normal."

I feel my belly spasm as air pours in.

"There you go," he says. "That's your diaphragm opening up. That's what singers use, and that's what you need to use to get some oxygen to that brain of yours, to calm you down."

I feel my belly opening, feel the air rushing in, feel my heart slow, remembering the first time I meet Grums for spiritual direction nearly five years earlier, just days after my encounter with Sister Miranda.

1993. Creighton Prep. Omaha, Nebraska. Grums laughs at me, affectionately, surveying me sharply from behind his black, rimless glasses as I step in from the cold October night in Omaha, shivering in a button-down shirt.

"Didn't anybody teach you to wear a coat?"

"Everything's so damned heated up here, I don't need one," I say.

"What about when you're in your car?"

"It's got a heater."

"And if it breaks down?"

We sit down in Grums' office, where a tiny azalea plant in a green plastic pot with one tiny pink bud on its thin body looks out at the cold gray sky, reminding me of New Orleans in

spring, when the massive, ubiquitous azaleas dominate the landscape, thick with hot pink, pastel purple, and white pedals. I know that this little plant on the cold windowsill will bloom under Grums' watchful, intelligent care despite its current desolation. But after putting on a happy face for the first thirty minutes of our session, telling Grums my basic vocation story, I hit a wall, unable to speak.

"Where did you go just now?" Grums asks after sitting with me in silence for ten minutes.

"I don't know," I say.

"You've got a very big heart," Grums says. "And in your heart I see this big wound festering, and I'm tempted to try to heal it, but I have to let God handle this one."

"Do you think I'll ever get over it?"

"Definitely, but my expertise can only take you so far."

"You think I need a shrink?"

"I know one who could help."

I trust Grums implicitly, but when I tell the short, soft-handed shrink to whom he sends me that I was molested as a child, he sits down next to me on his couch and talks to me like I'm a five year-old. I want to grab him by the throat and throw him through the window.

"Forget it," I say when I sit back in Grums' office. "I like you because you're a straight shooter. Shrinks don't shoot straight."

"Give me one more chance," Grums says. "I'll make sure to get you a straight shooter."

He does. Doctor Huntziker asks questions with all the calm detachment of an engineer testing industrial equipment, listening carefully to each response, nodding, asking more questions.

"The pain is in your jaw, your head and shoulders, you say?"

"Yeah, and sometimes there's this dripping in my head."

"Dripping?"

"Yeah. And I've noticed it at the library and at home, so I know it's not just some leaky faucet or something."

"Tell me about your parents."

"My Mom's about five feet tall. Likes to say she's four eleven and three-quarter inches, talks in this real high voice, sort of sings whatever she says. People tell me she's a really beautiful woman, but it's hard for me to tell because she's my mom."

"What's she like as a person?"

"Real dramatic, real Southern. Loves music, especially old Church music, and she's real religious. Has like a whole bookshelf just about Satan. Sometimes she's kind of paranoid, almost superstitious."

"How?"

"She says this woman at the country club is a witch, that she shouldn't give out communion because clearly she's in league with the devil."

"You think she really means it?"

"She might be kidding but it's hard to tell. She definitely believes Satan is active in the real world and out to get us. In rock music, Hollywood movies, even the Church has gone down the wrong path since Vatican Two, with the Mass no longer in Latin and all the nuns dressed

down. We're all going to hell, and at the end of the world when the angel of death comes and everything goes dark outside, those of us who are of the light will survive because God will spare us. I'm sorry if I'm making her sound crazy. She's really smart, and she'll completely surprise you sometimes with the stuff she knows and the words she uses. I love her, but sometimes the things she says really scare me."

"And your Dad?"

"He's never missed a day of work, has an MBA, a CPA and a JD, but he doesn't practice law because he thinks it's a racket, which in New Orleans, it is. The only time I've ever seen him express pain was once when we were on vacation and lightning struck a tree across the street right when he was reaching for the refrigerator. Other than that, he doesn't really express emotion. He used to kiss us on the forehead before work when we were kids, but at some point he stopped."

"So what was it like, growing up in their house?"

"It's kind of a miracle we all survived, and I know it's because Mom and Dad put their trust in God because they couldn't be there for us every moment of every day."

"Miracle is a pretty strong word. Was the neighborhood dangerous?"

"Not at all. Really safe actually, which I guess helped."

"Then why does it surprise you that you survived?"

"Probably because my Mom often says it's a miracle. The doctors in the emergency room at the hospital down the street all knew me by my first name because I was in and out with bee stings, stitches over my eye, a broken collar bone, always something. When I was 17 months old I climbed over a four-foot fence in our backyard and crawled across one of the busiest streets in the city to play in the park, and when I was ten or so, I used to hop freight trains

with my friends. Mom didn't know everything, but she knew I liked to take big chances, so I guess she's right, that it was kind of a miracle we all survived."

While Doctor Huntziker and I walk through the past, Grums and I tackle the present.

"Damn, Southern boy, you are some intense," he says. "You need to breathe."

"I'm trying to, Grums, but sometimes when I go to pray all I can think about is being with a woman."

"Couldn't be more natural," he says. "But you can learn to sublimate those feelings."

"Sublimate. Like sublime. I like that."

"Yeah, it's really cool. You can ask God to move those feelings from down below up through your heart."

He shows me a diagram of the human body on a card, like a holy card, showing the flow of energy from the lower extremities up through the heart and into the mind. I try it several times at home, but trying to push up my sexual feelings seems to make them stronger.

"Not working," I tell Grums the next time we meet. "It's like God did a disappearing act."

He gives me a book by Ruth Burrows called *Guidelines For Mystical Prayer*, about the dark night of the soul. It helps me feel that God is inching my soul through the darkness, ever closer to eternal happiness. Until that happiness becomes a reality, I try to put on a happy face, even when I meet with Doctor Huntziker.

"So, classes are tough, but I'm learning a lot. And you're really helping me learn more about myself, so I feel like things are getting better and better."

"Do you really think that? Or are you just trying to make me feel good?"

"What do you mean?"

"It feels like you're trying to convince me you're okay, but you don't believe it."

As I leave his office, it feels like he has ripped a big smiley mask off of my face, and by the time I get to the car, my hands are shaking with rage. I scream at the top of my lungs, punching the dashboard of the Jesuit community car, a small Toyota.

Trying to feed, clothe, and properly educate seven kids in decaying New Orleans was my parents' job, one of the most challenging in the universe. New Orleans was not only hard-hit by the oil bust of the 1980s, plagued with the crack epidemic and one of the highest murder rates in the country. It was also infused with a conservative Catholic culture that bottles up emotion by day, and with the salve of alcohol lets it all loose by night. I understand that Mom and Dad did the best they could, but this knowledge doesn't take away the rage flowing through my veins like lava. I detest myself for this rage, so severely that when I get back to our study community in Omaha, I cannot quiet the voice that tells me to kill myself.

"It'll make life a whole lot easier for everyone," it says, repeating the ugly refrain I haven't heard since my sophomore year of high school, when I recklessly drove home from bars drunk, the disappointment over being dumped by a girl spiraling into a full-blown depression. "Anyone who engages in premarital sex, even worse, homosexual premarital sex, is unredeemable. You're worthless."

1989. New Orleans, Louisiana. Some nights I drive home so drunk that when I wake up in the morning I can't remember doing it. The only person who can stop me is my best friend.

"Dude, we're worried about you," he says one night, after forcibly taking the car keys away from me. "Everyone would miss you terribly if anything happened to you."

"Whatever," I say. "They wouldn't even notice."

"That's not true," he says. "I love you like my own brother."

It's a far cry from Dad's response when, shaking with rage, he dangles me in the air, spanking me with a thick leather belt when I'm seven years old.

1979. Metairie, Louisiana. "I don't care!" Dad yells, drunk from his third martini. He is frustrated with my Mom, overwhelmed with his duties at work, plagued with a splitting toothache, and suffering from childhood pains he never discusses with anyone.

"But Dad," I say, trying to explain that I am holding down Michael to prevent him from hitting our younger brother Peter.

"I don't want to hear it. You're a bully!" he shouts, spanking me even harder. "You're worthless!"

I stop talking to Mom and Dad and stop playing with my toys, preferring instead to find quiet places on top of the neighbor's white brick fence, or high in the live oak tree in our side yard, places where I can feel the wind in my face and not deal with the chaos inside. I find older friends in the neighborhood who get me drunk on Miller ponies at age eight and teach me curse words that I spray paint on the side of the white shed in big black letters. When Dad finds the words "fuck you asshole" on the shed, and knows it was me who did it, he doesn't say anything. When cops bring me and a group of five friends, all eleven years old, to the door at two in the morning, after we have been out rolling houses with toilet paper we stole from the Methodist church next door, Dad says nothing.

"I don't care!" his voice echoes through my mind. "You're worthless."

He does threaten to end our family vacation to Florida when, at eleven years old I stumble in shit-faced drunk to the condo we are renting in Destin, but in the end he does nothing, and we never speak of the incident again.

When I drop twenty one seconds from my time in the five hundred freestyle as a sophomore in high school, scoring third in state behind my best friend and team captain, the voice echoing in my head, which has taken on a life of its own says: "See? You couldn't even win when the victory that was right in front of you. You are worthless."

While all the other guys cheer, putting their arms around each other, ecstatic that we have won state for the second year in a row, I watch them from a distance, disappointed at my failure.

"What a relief it will be for your teammates," the voice says. "When you're no longer around to bum everybody out. And your parents. They don't deserve this ingratitude. So do them a favor and disappear."

As I bang my head against the hard wooden door frame in my room in the Jesuit community five years later, hours after Doctor Huntziker confronts me, I realize that it's not myself I want to kill. It's the pain.

"Why didn't you listen to me?" I shout at my parents, tears streaming from my eyes. "You were so caught up in trying to get to heaven, you missed the fact that I was living in hell."

"All I want them to do is listen," the rage says, shrinking from an out-of-control, amorphous force to that nine year-old kid on the bike, alone and terrified, unaware that his underwear is on backwards, unable to speak of his shame. I hold this kid in the folds of my heart, telling him that all will be well, that I am here, that there is nothing he can do that will ever make him unworthy of my love.

1994. Omaha, Nebraska. The next time I meet Doctor Huntziker, I am able, for the first time in my life, to talk about my anger and frustration to someone who listens.

Grums applauds my progress.

"Welcome to the human race," he says. "Doesn't it feel good to feel something?"

"It hurts," I say, "feels totally out of control."

"It probably will for a while."

The energy I spend trying to deny these feelings and shove them back down has grown through the years like credit card debt, making it more and more difficult to relax and enjoy the present moment.

Returning home that summer, after my first year of studies in Omaha, I begin the long process of mending my relationship with my parents. Sometimes I sound like a self-righteous, ungrateful, accusatory pain in the ass to my parents, who grew up at the tail end of the Greatest Generation and firmly hold the notion that you never under any circumstances question authority or discuss unpleasant feelings.

1995. St. Louis, Missouri. "What do you want from us?" Dad asks one night, when I confront him about his drinking and the long-term effects of his spankings on me and two other siblings who struggle with depression. "You're an asshole Wesley. You want to tell us we failed as parents? Okay, we're bad parents."

"We're all assholes," I say. "Grandpa came home from the war and everybody's saying what a saint he is, but he beats you with the belt because a bunch of women spoiled you while he was away at war."

"Don't bring Grandpa into this."

"Making you sit in front of bowl of oatmeal for twelve hours didn't bother you?"

"I said keep him out."

"Fine. The point is, I love you, and I love Mom and I wish we could sit down and have a real conversation instead of tiptoeing around everything all the time."

"I love you, too," he says. Though I know he will never understand me as I wish he could, I know I can still be happy. And yet, I'm not. After nearly seven years of pursuing the way of life I began with such certainty, I am beginning to think God has other plans.

1998. Camp Thunderhead. Mercer, Wisconsin. I push my hand gently against my stomach, squeezing the old, stale air from my diaphragm and allowing in a fresh, dry draught. Grums stands over me, watching me as though I'm his own son.

"Well golly be," he says in a light Southern accent. "I do believe you've taken a real breath."

"I believe you're about right," I say. "Feels good to get some oxygen, get my brain working."

We eat dinner that night at a long wooden table, looking out at the frozen white lake outside. In the summer, Hispanic nine and ten year olds from inner-city Milwaukee will learn swimming, boating and fishing on that lake, and in this cabin will catch up on basic reading and writing skills in both Spanish and English. These students are part of a new wave of more than ten inner city middle schools the Jesuits started in the 1980s and 1990s, in places like the Bronx and East Harlem, serving underprivileged kids who otherwise wouldn't acquire the skills necessary to complete high school. Over ninety percent will go on to graduate college because of the skills they acquire in these Nativity schools. I have been urging my provincial in New

Orleans to start this kind of school. I have asked to spend the three years teaching in a Nativity School so that, when I am a priest, I can start a series of schools based on this model in New Orleans.

"What are you getting so serious about?" Grums asks.

"Just thinking how I'd love to work here next summer," I say, "but I don't think the provincial's going to go for it."

I remember my meeting with the provincial two weeks before, when I told him I wanted to start nativity schools in New Orleans, that I didn't see any better way for us to use our resources in a city that desperately needed educational help.

Grand Coteau, Louisiana. "But the Edmundites are already starting a Nativity school," the provincial argues. The provincial, who loves the concept of "alternative futures," in favor of the poor, as opposed to our white bread academic institutions for the elite, doesn't seem ready to make those concepts a reality.

"You can't have too many of these schools," I say. "New Orleans needs four hundred of them."

The provincial reminisces with great pleasure about the time he built a gym as a president of one of our high schools. I know he will never make alternative futures a reality. He is too afraid to put a young scholastic in harm's way, too afraid to risk his own time and donors' money on a project that has potential to backfire, too afraid to upset another religious order by duplicating their efforts.

Mercer, Wisconsin. Grums sees the anxiety growing in my face.

"We'd all love to save the world," he says. "But we can't, so we put it in God's hands."

"But what's the difference, in one of these high schools, between the married guy who makes fifty thousand teaching theology, enough for a fairly decent life, and myself, who gives up everything for it?"

"You'd be surprised how much need there is in our schools, how people who look so successful on the outside are suffering on the inside, looking for more."

"I know. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for the Jesuits at my high school. But still. I'm starting to wonder if it's worth all the trouble."

Chapter Fourteen

1997. Bellarmine House. St. Louis, Missouri. I have walked past this small parlor, hiding like a closet just to the right of the front door of our philosophy study community, literally hundreds of times. But I have never noticed it until tonight. Carlos, a Central American scholastic with short, wavy black hair and a neatly-trimmed goatee, sits in the golden light of a reading lamp in the parlor, on the firm, finely upholstered Victorian couch, beneath an antique map of the world in a large gold frame. Across the room from Carlos, a window looks out on the front porch, where last spring, I sat on a broad wooden swing waiting to meet Elizabeth for the first time. Even as I step into the parlor, images of Elizabeth run through my mind like scenes from another lifetime - her green eyes smiling in the sun the day we met on the porch, the blood red drop of her tears on her jacket on our last night in Saint Louis together, the touch of her fingertips to my lips.

"I never even noticed this room," I say. "Very swanky."

"It's not bad," Carlos says, enunciating each syllable carefully, methodically trying to eliminate all traces of Spanish, his native tongue. "But let's be honest. It is a little retro."

"I can dig retro," I say.

By the critical look in his black eyes, I know I've failed some sort of gay test, the kind that, like this parlor in the front of our house, I have seen and heard and known I've failed. The catty comments about décor and discussions of new liturgical styles emerging like haute couture fashions informs the unique architecture of Jesuit communal culture as much as the *Spiritual Exercises*. For five years, I have entirely missed this element, trying instead to find healthy ways to live the vows while committing my life to the poor. I have refused to acknowledge the gaiety

of my brothers in Christ for fear that it would reduce my holy mission to an elaborate set of excuses for men to wear dresses and role play.

1996. St. Charles College. Grand Coteau, Louisiana. When we break from our conferences on sexuality and celibacy, I mill around Jesuits sipping Scotch and swapping notes over their latest excursions, hearing snippets of conversation as I hunt for my friend Tony Corcoran.

"Well, my brother Franciscan from theology studies was getting ordained in Paris, and of course I couldn't not go. Holy charity."

I pour myself a Coke, hearing other bits of a conversation from the other side of the room.

"Oh my God, so we step into this sorry excuse for a Basilica, and you know those tacky red curtains that hang near the statue of St. Jude? Yeah, those."

I know they are gay, know that we all belong under the same roof, and better that they deal with the drapes, the vestments, the styles of chalices and ciboriums and all the minutiae that I would rather not worry about. As long as we all live by the same vow of chastity, and understand that we have different gifts but the same spirit, what does gay or straight, woman or man, Jew or Greek matter?

Carlos confides his sexual preferences to me at this conference on sexuality, where the whole Southern province gathers to discuss what it mean to live a healthy celibate lifestyle. I've known Carlos for four years now, and have always assumed he is straight, but have always wondered why, when we worked together in the Dominican Republic two years earlier, he got irritated whenever I lit up around beautiful women.

I am moved, at the conference, by the number of men who come out of the closet and admit they are gay, admit that they have at times fallen short of their vows, but in this struggle have discovered a deeper relationship with God. I see these guys, whom the Church's teaching shuns for their God-given inclinations, as more than just ecclesiastical interior decorators. I see them as people longing, like I am, for a place where they can love and be loved. I wonder, as I listen to them, if my homophobia from being molested as a kid has stood in the way of my accepting these men as they are. Perhaps I have relied too much on women for emotional support, instead of relying on these male companions, out of fear of their homosexuality.

When Carlos sits me down at the conference and confesses that he is gay, I calm the fears that tell me to avoid Carlos in the future, instructing them that my wounded past is finished, and it's time to get beyond it. I have nothing to fear from Carlos, a struggling soul, like myself, except for that now irrelevant matter of his sexual preference.

"We've gotten to be pretty good friends," Carlos says. "And I'm afraid you'll reject me now that you know."

"Not at all," I say. "The way I see it, we're both living the same vows, so ultimately it doesn't matter that much anyway."

"Well," he says. "Actually, it's a totally different experience to be a gay celibate, but I don't think you can really understand that."

"Celibacy is celibacy," I say.

"Kind of," he says. "It is a little different for us, though."

Is Carlos saying it's actually okay for gay Jesuits to have sex with each other, that they are privileged when it comes to celibacy because they have struggled so much in mainstream society? This line of reasoning makes about as much sense as the fact that Pope John Paul II is,

as we speak, allowing married priests with families, converting from Anglican and Lutheran churches, to serve as Roman Catholic priests in America. At the same time, he still mandates that lifelong Roman Catholic men who seek the priesthood be celibate.

I hear the volume of my voice rising as I protest, "That's bullshit, Carlos, it's not different," I say, then catch myself. I'm not here to argue with him. I'm here to understand and appreciate him, to get over my prejudices and fears about homosexual priests.

"I guess you're right that I don't understand it," I say. "I mean, how did you even know you were gay?"

"For one thing, I played with dolls when I was a kid, and that really pissed my dad off."

"Maybe you cared more about relationships than blowing shit up."

"I dressed them up in women's clothes and make-up," he says. "When I was twelve Dad took me to a whorehouse with my older brothers and tried to make me have sex with a prostitute. I just thought it was gross."

"Wasn't there a civil war raging at the time? Wasn't that traumatic?"

Carlos taught me the anti-American, Sandanista propaganda songs two years earlier, as we traversed hilly, remote farmland and ford streams in a white Toyota Land Cruiser, giving communion services and preaching to the poor in the Dominican Republic, along the border of Haiti. In the two months we spent at the Jesuit parish along the River Massacre - where in 1937 the Dominican dictator Trujillo, put in place by the United States military, murdered 20,000 Haitians as revenge against Haitian spies - Carlos and I visited over twenty remote, outlying villages. When we returned to the parish church, we spent the evenings in wrought iron chairs on the roof of the Jesuit residence, where Carlos told me stories of growing up and leaving his home country on foot, walking all the way to Tijuana, Mexico where he crossed the border

illegally. I'm amazed at his story, but I have always felt like he is holding something back, until this day in Grand Coteau.

"Yeah, it was a crazy time," he says of his growing up in the midst of a civil war, "but the point is, I wasn't attracted to women."

"So you look at a guy's hairy ass, and you find that attractive?"

"It's not like that," he says. "It's more about spending time with someone you really like."

"When I'm attracted to a woman, l think about having sex with her constantly. You sure what you're talking about it is a sexual attraction?"

"I have no doubt," he says.

I end the conversation here, trying to digest this new reality, that I have given up the opportunity to complete a relationship with someone like Elizabeth to live with a bunch of men who share a homosexual bond I will never understand. Not all of my brothers in Christ are gay. My friend Skeeter, a philosophizing former frat boy from Wyoming, with whom I work out and attend sweats on the Red Cloud Indian Reservation in South Dakota during novitiate, shares my affection for women. But after going over the deep end, driving his superiors crazy by insisting on his own program of study during his first year of philosophy, Skeeter leaves the Society so he can get married. There is Ugo, a Nigerian soccer superstar who walks on to the varsity team at Gonzaga University, and soon finds himself surrounded by beautiful women. He eventually gives in. Another friend, a hip New Yorker name Ken who finds God in his study of American pop culture, loses over a hundred pounds as part of his spiritual awakening, and beneath all that weight discovers a wonderful new world of affection for women. When Ken finds that women

now share an attraction to him, he finds no alternative but to explore his affective life outside the Society.

1534. University of Paris. France. Being a Jesuit revolves partly around sharing a commitment with like-minded guys, the kind whom Iñigo trains in the *Spiritual Exercises* at the University of Paris from 1528 to 1534**,** while studying theology to become a priest. By this leg of Iñigo's journey, he has already spent eight years studying Latin and theology, beginning in Barcelona, moving to Alcala and Salamanca, where the Inquisition hounds him for helping souls without the proper credentials. The Inquisitors throw him in jail several times, once for twenty-two nights. He leaves Spain for Paris clearly focused on becoming a priest, intent on finding friends who will help him carry out his mission of saving souls. At the University of Paris he gathers, one by one, a solid group of nine individuals, a diverse international group, whom he trains in the *Spiritual Exercises*, converting them to a life of service to God. These men band together with the original intention of laboring for God in the Holy Land, but over several years, their plans evolve.

With each of Iñigo's nine companions sufficiently trained to give the *Spiritual Exercises* to others, and with the priesthood firmly under their belts, they form the Society of Jesus and put themselves at the disposal of Pope Paul III in 1541, to be sent wherever the Church most needs them. Iñigo and his newly ordained companions each vow perpetual chastity and poverty, so they will be free to travel lightly across the world helping souls, as well as obedience, to facilitate governance of their newly formed Society. Iñigo's directive regarding obedience is that subjects should be "like a stick waiting to be thrown." Regarding poverty, he states that "nothing

in our rules should be changed in regards to poverty except to make it stricter." His only advice regarding chastity is that it should be lived "like the angels."

1997. Bellarmine House. St. Louis, Missouri. I wonder, as I enter the hidden parlor in the second house of our study community and sit next to Carlos, after attending the conference on sexuality at Grand Coteau, whether Carlos and his gay friends know some way of living chastity that I as a straight guy do not understand. Maybe they've figured out a way to live like the angels.

Since I've returned to campus after our conference, I've tried to be more open to other seminarians, with whom we take theology classes at Aquinas Institute, and whom I had mostly ignored previously, due to my knee-jerk homophobia. I have made a particularly concerted effort to befriend the members of the Order of Saint Dominic, around whom I have felt particularly uncomfortable. When one of the Dominicans, a former modern dancer, told me, "You are beautiful, I would really like to kiss you right now," I suppressed my urge to hit him.

"Thank you," I said, "but I'm afraid I'm not attracted to men. And aren't we both trying to live the vow of chastity?"

"Oh, but I believe God is very happy with my being gay, and God loves all of us, even our sexuality. You know ninety percent of religious enter this life to suppress their sexuality? I don't think you should suppress it. You should live it the way God intends."

"So, you're saying I should feel free to have sex, even though I took vows?"

"I'm saying chastity is a matter of interpretation."

"And your interpretation happens to be that you can have sex with whomever you please?"

"More or less," he said, looking at me lustfully.

Determined to better understand how living the vow is different for gay Jesuits, I have asked Carlos and the obviously gay Jesuits in our community for more information about their ways of living the vows.

"You've got to have an outlet," one of my gay Jesuit brothers from the New England province told me, "or you get yourself into trouble."

"What kind of outlet? You mean, having sex with people?"

"You've seen how unhealthy some of the older guys get. I'm not going to get busted for participating in a juvenile porn ring like Father So-and-So. So, I take care of my needs."

Eventually, he confessed that he had a boyfriend on the side, with whom he spent an occasional night, with whom he rollerbladed in the park on the weekends. I pictured him and his boyfriend, a young, athletic guy wearing tight sweatpants, rollerblading through the park, slapping each other's asses and then… whatever they did in their apartment later that night.

I pictured what might happen if this gay Jesuit didn't have the lover, pictured him fondling some poor high school kid during an after-school session. I did not yet understand that gay men have no more proclivities towards child molestation than do straight men. I accepted this New England Jesuit's false assertion that if he didn't have the boyfriend he would wind up a pedophile. I didn't yet know that one day I would work side by side with openly gay men, in the restaurant and entertainment industries, and would feel far more comfortable with them than I ever did with many priests in the Society, where gay men keep their feelings locked up, so that they only rise to the surface in awkward moments of uncontrolled desire.

I remembered my junior theology teacher grabbing my ass, and rumors about another Jesuit who put eighth graders on his lap in his dark office after school. I smelled the cologne of an older novice who sits me down in Grand Coteau, when I was nineteen years old.

1992. St. Charles College. Grand Coteau, Louisiana. "The truth is," the older novice says, "I'm gay, and there are lots more of us in the Society than you probably realize."

"So what," I say, defensive, scared. "We're all living the same vows."

He smiles condescendingly. "It's not the same, and you're going to have to learn that if you're going to make it as a Jesuit. You know Norm Rogge, the minister here, is a child molester."

"That's ridiculous. He does an amazing job at his mission church. He built a museum, he holds Zydeco dances for the people, he's a great apostle."

"Why do you think he works in an unincorporated town? Why do you think they shuffle him around from remote mission to remote mission? They're hiding him."

"That's the biggest bunch of lies I've ever heard," I say. "Our superiors are taking care of things. They would never do anything like that."

"Think whatever you want," he says. "I'm just warning you."

I shrug it off, thinking the older novice is just trying to discourage me, to make himself feel better. But then, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation months later, one of the priests in our community stands up at our weekly meeting and tells us the bishop has ordered him to leave the diocese. He is a cheerful guy who tells us dirty limericks that keep us all laughing, and when we go to funerals the kids all gather around him to play with his monkey finger puppets. The community groans to hear that he is moving on, but nobody says why. Somewhere in the back

of my mind, I have this strong feeling that he is a child molester. He has talked about Saint Luke's treatment center, and there is this uncomfortable moment when he stares at me, just before he leaves, and says: "I can see you are wounded." I feel like he is peering through a window in my soul, that he can see that I have been molested. But I am still too numb to feel any reaction. I assume the Society is taking care of the situation, assume that it is possible to treat this sort of illness effectively, assume that they will move him somewhere where he won't hurt kids. I don't ask questions. I don't feel betrayed. I don't feel like an accomplice.

1997. Bellarmine House. St. Louis, Missouri. "Hellloooo! Spacehead," the gay New England scholastic in Saint Louis calls out, five years later.

"Sorry," I say.

"So, at least nobody gets pregnant," he says. "You straight guys really can't afford it. The province pays child support, moves the priest to a different city. It gets ugly."

"Seriously?" I say, feeling the anger flush through my jaw line. "So that's why it's different for gay Jesuits? Because you can have sex and nobody gets pregnant?"

"It happens. It's very messy. We don't risk any of that."

"How many in our community are gay?"

"More than you think," he says. "And some don't even know themselves yet."

As part of my ongoing quest to overcome my homophobia and understand what makes gay Jesuits different, Carlos takes me to the local gay bar near the medical school. I am astounded by the number of normal-looking yuppies sipping drinks at a bar, looking out at a dance floor filled with normal-looking men. I had imagined that the place would be packed with bearded ladies and bare-assed rednecks in leather chaps.

I feel the heated stares of several clean-shaven old men from across the bar, and watch one of them put his hand on a young guy's ass. My stomach turns.

"I need some air," I say.

We step onto a patio near a sand volleyball court, where I see the New England scholastic chatting with a group of guys I have never seen before. He sees me and waves politely, in a way that lets me know he would rather keep this side of his life to himself.

"All right, I've had enough," I tell Carlos.

A week later, Carlos and I are sitting in the parlor, and I'm starting to get disoriented. The pain of losing Elizabeth, the daily discoveries of gayness in more and more priests and brothers surrounding me, the emptiness of prayer, the deconstruction of my worldview in philosophy class, the angry confrontation with my family in therapy.

"Is it possible that I am gay?" I ask Carlos. "Am I just running away from my sexuality? Every single sexual fantasy I have is about women. But what if I've just been kidding myself or something?"

Carlos gets up and closes the door.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Trust me. You don't want people to hear you talking right now."

For a moment I understand how different living chastity is for gay men, who must mask their feelings at every moment, whereas I, even as a Jesuit, can speak my true feelings of attraction for women without fear. A wave of appreciation washes over me, pondering this struggle that so many famous artists and writers like Michelangelo and Tennessee Williams faced. This strong feminine sensitivity and appreciation for beauty, matched with testosterone-driven masculinity, mirrors the kind of healthy animus-anima balance Carl Jung describes. I see,

in that moment, that God has blessed gay men with a unique gift, one that the world should recognize and embrace instead of shunning.

"Why don't you come sit on the couch?" Carlos says.

Though my gut repels me, I've given my word that I won't reject Carlos just because he is gay, and that means I have to trust him, to learn to speak his language.

Carlos puts his hand on my shoulder, and I think, "This is no different from what my friends and I used to do at football games and swim meets in high school. It's just part of the way males bond. No more off-bounds than it was for me to put my hand on Elizabeth's shoulder."

"See? That doesn't feel that bad, does it," Carlos says.

"It's really not," I say.

Then he leans in to kiss me, and I pull back, trying not to offend him, but when he pushes his tongue against my lips, thrusting it into my mouth, I push him away.

"No way. That's disgusting," I say.

He gets up and hurries out of the parlor, and I feel like I've been stung by a poisonous serpent.

"What the fuck?" I say out loud.

The next day, I go straight to Bob Martin's office and report the sequence of events leading to the previous night, and when I get to the part where Carlos tries to kiss me, Bob Martin, who has just taken over as superior of our study community, says:

"What, you've never been hit on by a guy before?"

"Isn't it a violation of our vows, of communal trust? I give him every benefit of the doubt, and this is how he repays me?"

Bob Martin stares at me blankly, like he really couldn't give a shit, like I am interrupting time he could spend on the back porch smoking cigarettes, or drinking beer and watching basketball games. During my first year in this study community, the superior before Bob Martin conducted monthly meetings with his staff, and included two scholastics to monitor what was happening in the house. Bob abandoned the practice as soon as he took over.

After a long moment of silence, Bob says:

"You're a mystery to be cherished, not a problem to be solved."

There's a deadness in his voice, like he doesn't want to exist, like he is a disembodied spirit who happens to inhabit the body of Bob Martin.

One month later. St. Louis, Missouri. Corey and I eat burgers at a diner two blocks from the hospital where Corey's best friend Duane, a gay Dominican studying to become a priest, is dying of leukemia. Duane has asked me to please take care of Corey when he is gone, and I'm intrigued by the request. Corey, a twenty-eight year old, well-spoken, light-skinned who carries himself with stern confidence, seems quite capable of taking care of himself. When Corey invites me to dinner, I accept, hoping to get some insight into the request. We are halfway through our hamburgers, enduring an awkward silence, when Corey finally speaks up.

"How can you study to become a priest, knowing what goes on behind closed doors?"

"What, you mean all the gay priests and everything? I thought you knew Duane was gay."

He shakes his head.

"No. I mean the bad shit."

He tells how a priest molested him from the time he was ten years old to the time he was twenty. Though Corey tried to break off the relationship many times, the priest was extremely persuasive and used cash to get what he wanted.

"When you're seventeen years old, and this guy you've known for all these years pays you, he knows how to fuck with your mind. Add three hundred dollars into the mix, it's hard to say no."

Though the priest's crimes have been brought to the attention of the Archbishop, he has never been censured. Instead, he has been shuttled around to poor, mostly African-American parishes where people have no financial or legal means to fight. Corey is part of a victims' group that is planning to sue the archdiocese, but they have been informed that no judge in Saint Louis will rule against the Church. Corey has personally met with the Archbishop (soon to be a Cardinal) and made a request to remove the priest's right to exercise his holy office. The Archbishop responds vindictively.

"How dare you accuse a priest of God," the Archbishop says. "Kneel down and pray for God's forgiveness."

I am appalled by Corey's story, and want to do something about it, but when I picture myself telling Bob Martin about the situation I remember the incident with Carlos. I picture his probable response: "What, you've never heard of a priest paying a fourteen year-old a hundred dollars to sleep with him?"

So I keep it to myself. Eventually I will decide that I cannot stay in a Church that harbors these kinds of predators with impunity. But before I come to that resolution, I fight to give my vocation traction.

One month later. St. Louis, Missouri. "If I don't start seeing a reason for these vows, I don't care if I'm a mystery or a problem, I'm going to leave the Society."

Bob sits up in his chair, showing a sign of life.

"The Society has given you an awful lot. Don't you think you should give back before writing her off completely?"

"The Society I joined doesn't exist."

"Hang in there," he says. "Working those seventeen hour days in Regency will remind you why you started this life in the first place."

"Not if they send me to these white bread high schools for the rich."

"Those schools teach kids much more than just how to make money."

"I've been in Jesuit institutions now for almost twelve years. I want to share our spirituality with the people who really need it."

"You should," he says. "Tell your provincial what you just told me, and give Carlos another chance. He's a good guy."

I do give Carlos another chance, but for six weeks he doesn't speak to me. I write my provincial a letter, explaining how I feel called to work with the poor in Nativity schools, so that one day I can return to New Orleans to start them. Midway through my final semester of philosophy studies, the provincial sends me my regency assignment: Jesuit Dallas College Preparatory School, the most elite of our four all-boys, mostly white high schools in the South. I already feel strongly that God is leading me out of the Society, but I have learned that discernment is often a slow process. I don't leap to conclusions.

Chapter Fifteen

1997. St. Louis, Missouri. Seventeen months have passed since Elizabeth's fingertips touched my cheek. I think of her each time I take off my shoes and walk barefoot down the hall, or see the dying leaves of the Bradford pear trees turning purple and gold in front of our Victorian house. I crush pastels to paper, trying to replicate the passion of the trees, trying to cool the embers.

This foggy Thursday morning in late October, I cannot shake the memories of Elizabeth's smile from my mind. I sign out the house car, skip philosophy classes and drive an hour to Green Hills, where our community owns a quiet house on acres of pristine woods. I turn off the main road, climbing a blacktop path flanking a white horse fence, narrowing as it rises past beautiful, rustic homes. After the climb, the road snakes through a quiet glade for several minutes before it reaches the gate to our property.

I walk barefoot through a grassy open field wet with dew. The thrill of the cool water on my feet reminds me of being next to Elizabeth and her longing for oneness with nature. I remember her editorial in the *University News*, how she idealized Native people and their way of life, and I recall my first sweat ceremony on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

1992. Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota. I am 19 years old, a novice on what is called my "third world" experiment, stripping naked in temperatures hovering just below zero, stepping barefoot through a thin layer of snow far beneath the sharp crags of a giant butte towering high above beneath the half moon. My classmates have gone to work in soup kitchens, orphanages and agricultural schools in Mexico and the Dominican Republic, but I am here, in the poorest county in the United States, working as a teacher's assistant and bus driver at Red Cloud

Indian School. The Jesuits have had a presence here since Chief Red Cloud of the Lakota Sioux asked the US government to send black robes to open a school here in 1888.

Several yards away, near a roaring fire, the medicine man scatters tobacco to the four winds, praying in Lakota, raising a red pipe in the air. I wrap a towel around my waist and move past the fire towards the sweat lodge, a round canvass structure, muttering "*mitakuye oyasin*" as I enter the lodge. I move in a circle from left to right around a fire pit, already filled with white-hot rocks.

The medicine man's two friends, paunchy Lakota men with jet black hair pulled into ponytails, enter the lodge, moving around the circle to sit on the earthen floor next to me. The two priests who drove me here enter next. They are laid-back guys who have been on the reservation for years. They have done hundreds of sweats, attend sun dances each year, and know most of the medicine men on the reservation.

"Hey, *mitakuye oyasin*," they say, breathing loudly as they make their way around the pit to their places. The medicine man enters last, muttering prayers in Lakota and sloshing a bucket of water into the lodge. We all sit quietly for a moment, our eyes adjusting to the dark. The rocks glow faintly. They have been sitting in the fire for the past three hours, before the medicine man pulled them from the fire using deer antler tongs and dropped them into the pit in the middle of the lodge.

"Thank you, *Wakantanka*, for this beautiful night, for the snow, for the Indian ways. Hey."

The other Lakota, and even the priests, echo "ho, hey," and I find myself quietly mimicking them as I sniff a sage bunch the medicine man gave me to help me breathe during the sweat.

"We pray to you, *Wakantanka*, Oh Great Spirit," the medicine man says, "for wisdom tonight. For anyone among our people who is suffering, anyone struggling on the red road. The Lakota people have gone through so much suffering, hey. We thank you, *Tankashala*, oh Grandfather, for showing us the right road, and we thank you for *mitakuye oyasin*, all our relatives, our people here on the reservation, all people through the world, our brother four-legged and two-legged creatures, the trees, and even the rocks. Tonight we will suffer for our people *Tankashala*, and through our suffering we ask you to help them."

The dry heat emanating from the rocks creates relaxing, sauna-like conditions, and I assume the suffering the medicine man describes is psycho-spiritual. I've never heard prayer described as suffering, but I suppose sitting in such a tight space for two hours eventually becomes painful. Right now it feels good.

The medicine man pours a cupful of water onto the rocks, telling us that water is the first medicine, and the lodge heats up, but it's still refreshing, like a steam room. Then the medicine man closes the flap and splashes another cup of water on the rocks, and the searing steam tears at my skin.

"There's no shame in leaving if the heat becomes too much," the medicine man says. "Just shout '*mitakuye oyasin*,' and I'll open the lodge."

I want to scream, to crawl out shouting "*mitakuye oyasin*," but my competitive streak won't allow it.

The medicine man sings in Lakota, and everyone picks up the tune, singing loudly. After the refrain repeats several times, I shout at the top of my lungs along with everyone else, mumbling a rough mimicry of the words, just to keep my mind from the searing steam. I hear the word "*Tankashala*," several times and latch onto it, praying to God as the Grandfather who

created everything. I offer the suffering up to Grandfather, asking him to heal the wounds of the Lakota people, who suffer the highest rates of poverty, alcohol abuse and unemployment in the country.

I picture my Grandpa, seeing his fierce strength and playful gentleness, remembering his love for the trees and birds and his connection to God. My image of him changes from the Grandpa I know to a much older Indian man, and I know that this is *Tankashala*, the Great Grandfather who created all things. I see a strong white light emanating from this Grandfather in every direction. Light radiating from this Grandfather permeates the planets and stars, and I feel him reaching out to heal the wounds of the teachers and students with whom I work at the school. I imagine the Jesuits in my community, and I feel this Grandfather healing their bitterness and buoying up the love they share with the people in the Red Cloud community. I thank *Tankashala* for my parents, my brothers and sisters, my grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. I offer each one to *Tankashala*, to guide them on their way and give them healing.

As the second hour of the ceremony approaches, the heat grows brutal. I lie closer to the ground, trying to endure. I breathe through the bunch of sage, which helps my mouth feel cooler, and thank *Tankashala* for its fresh, sweet scent. When the lodge's flap opens, after nearly two hours of ceremony, I step barefoot onto the snow, delightfully in touch with the air around me.

1997. Green Hills. St. Louis, Missouri. Five years later, I remember that feeling as I walk along the cool, wet grassy field at Green Hills, an hour from our study community in Saint Louis. I kneel and pray that God make me one with the world around me. I dig into the grass, pulling up mud, spreading it over my shoulders and my chest, covering my cheeks with it.

"One day I will shrivel back to mud," I say. "God, give me the strength to accept death as part of following the path to integrity. Help me accept death in all its forms, in failure and rejection."

A grasshopper leaps onto a blade of grass next to me, looks up, and soars yards away, disappearing into a patch of weeds. I leap after him, remembering the pow-wows where dancers imitated prairie hens and the antelope with whom they shared the land before we *wasichus* came like a black cloud of locusts, descending on their land and ruining their way of life. I dance in a circle, hoping nobody has accidentally wandered onto the property to see me, naked and covered in mud. I shrug off the fears and leap in circles, praising God for the trees towering above me, the dew on the grass, and the joy of being alive. I imagine the sun dancers on the reservation, hanging from their own flesh until it tears, dancing through pain and exhaustion to a heightened, sacred state. I dance through the pain of heartbreak over Elizabeth, the confusion over my community, and the strain of studies, thanking God for this day of freedom from it all.

Months later, I join a group of Jesuits driving up to Milwaukee to visit friends, and get permission to drive alone to Madison to visit Elizabeth for a day. Seeing her there, her green eyes happy in the glow of sunlight shimmering on the lakes of the more open and free-thinking campus, I know she has found her path. Her newfound love, a place on the university rowing team, gets her out on the lake to see the beauty of dawn every morning, no matter how cold or foggy. She talks about a boyfriend, and how they will spend time in Asia doing ecological studies the following summer. The work clearly excites her, but she doesn't seem as excited about the boyfriend, and at the end of the day, when we go to hug, she moves to kiss me on the lips. Turning away from her reminds me of steam from white-hot rocks scalding my skin in a

sweat ceremony. I don’t know why our roads cannot run side by side, why I am choosing a path that clearly runs against my nature.

Alone in the car, as the dying sun sheds its crimson light over the lakes and farms of Wisconsin, I pray out loud, thanking God for Elizabeth.

Chapter Sixteen

1999. Apartment. Staten Island. I have no bed, no furniture, no silver ware, no car, no job, no guarantees. I eat cereal out of a tin pan I acquired at the Chinese take-out down the street. I cook vegetable and chicken dishes using that same tin pan at night, and eat it with the same plastic spoon. Lying in a tent I've set up on the carpeted floor of this apartment in a renovated Navy building on Staten Island, the nearest apartment to Manhattan on which I can afford to pay the deposit and first and last month's rent with the $3,000 the Society gave me when I left after my first six months of regency in Dallas, my chest heaves with sorrow. Warm tears stream down my cheeks.

While I know, deep in my gut, that I have made the right move, that the wooden cable spools I use as my kitchen table and chair indicate that for the first time in my life, I am actually living poverty and truly trusting in God, rather than the Society, I am afraid that I have let down God. I am afraid that I have let down Iñigo who, sixteen years after he founded the Society of Jesus, watched it grow to over one thousand members throughout the world. I am afraid that my failures in chastity, rebellion against my superiors and refusal to believe that my life in the Society amounted to one of poverty, underline a deep personal weakness for which God and Iñigo would judge me harshly.

For the first time in seven years, nobody will cook for me each night. I don't have access to a car and unlimited gasoline. If I am to stay in this apartment, I have two weeks to find a job, though I have no real work experience outside of my six months teaching in Dallas, where, despite my announcement that I am leaving the Jesuits, I am offered the opportunity to remain as a salaried teacher. As tempting as I find that offer, to remain in the safety and shelter of the Jesuit world in which I was raised, I feel a deep pull to discover who I am outside of it. In the

Jesuit world, people give me instant respect because of the "SJ" behind my name, those initials that indicate my membership in the Society of Jesus, a group of men that has produced so many great saints, scholars, mathematicians, missionaries, and artists.

As I weep, on the hard floor of this cheap apartment I cannot afford, I feel the comfort, protection, and certainty of the Society of Jesus falling away. I know that I walk alone in darkness, and I know that my faith means more now, when I cannot see the way ahead. Each day I get up, take the ferry to Manhattan as the sun rises over the harbor and the Statue of Liberty, and walk the streets of the city, scouring the Village Voice for want ads, dropping my resume in response.

Even when I finally land a job at a small restaurant in the West Village, my first paycheck doesn't arrive soon enough to pay the rent. So I call Dad.

"I just need to borrow some cash for this month. Once I start getting the better shifts, I can make over $200 in one night."

"All right," he says. "Anything you need, call us."

There is something in his voice I haven't felt since I was very young, an unfettered love and support. I understand now, that though Dad hasn't always had the energy to show it, it has always been here. It was I who, wounded and afraid as a nine year-old, walled myself up first behind an emotional barrier, and then later, the stone ramparts of religious life. Thankfully, the spiritual trail Iñigo blazed leads ever forward to reconciliation. The Jesuits have guided me in his footsteps, patiently leading me through the dark and painful regions of my soul. Though tender scars of those early wounds may linger, the bulk of the healing is done.

"Thanks, Dad." I say, remembering a conversation we have a year before that helps me confirm my decision to leave the Jesuits.

1998. Vacation House. Lake Pontchatrain, Louisiana. We are sitting at a heavy wrought-iron table, resting on the wooden pier of a rental house on the lake. My sister Lucy and her three children, the beginnings of a brood that will grow to seven over the next ten years, sit inside the house that stands on pilings over the calm lake with the rest of my six siblings. The sun rests, burnt orange turning to auburn, at the edge of the lake, sinking quickly downwards, ending the day.

"I don't know if I can live the vows anymore," I say. "I feel like I'm losing my mind."

I recall the pride in Grandpa's eyes when I tell him I am joining the Jesuits seven years earlier, the pictures of me dressed in black clerics that Mom frames and puts in five different prominent places in the house so that nobody can miss them. I remember the admiration of my friends, who tell me I am a better man than they.

I am ashamed of letting everyone down, of failing, of not finding my completion in God and not having the courage to endure in the face of adversity. I bring this shame to Dad, admitting that I have failed in my vows, that I want to find a wife and everything inside of me keeps driving me towards female companionship despite my best efforts.

Dad doesn't judge me harshly. He doesn't try to convince me of anything.

"There's one thing you've got to understand," he says.

"What's that, Dad?" I say, craving the invaluable pearls of wisdom that he so rarely puts forth.

"The Harrises are sex maniacs," he says.

That conversation with Dad opens the floodgates of honesty with myself. Though I still ask God for the grace to live my vows, over the course of the year I begin to realize that my

problems in the community are nobody's fault. Many of the guys with whom I live do not want to deal with their sexuality directly, and so they choose the only acceptable path allowed them by the Catholic Church, the celibate priesthood. While some bend the rules more than others, they make it work. Living this way, though not perfect, allows them a superior education, the means to help others, and prestige.

Tony Corcoran, an exception to this rule, travels by train through the frozen tundra of Siberia, 30 hours at a time, finding German Catholics whom Stalin shipped here after World War Two to work in labor camps. Tens of thousands die along the way, but the ones who still survive, fifty years later, pass along the Catholic faith to their grandchildren. Despite the intimidating presence of the Russian mafia, which takes apart these peasants' collective farms piece by piece and sells them on the black market, Tony slips and slides along the ice, carrying sacks of grain to relieve these German Catholics' starvation. Despite the remnants of the KGB who remind Tony Corcoran they know who each member of his family is back in the United States, he brings the good news to these poor people, telling them that God has not forgotten them and neither has the Church. He oversees the formation of young Jesuits and becomes the vicar to the bishop of Novosibirsk, a cold and unforgiving city of over a million in the middle of Siberia. Tony Corcoran thrives on this hardship and solitude, finding joy in the little miracles God provides for him and the people he serves. When I call him at nine o'clock in the morning Dallas time, to tell him I feel that God is calling me out of the Society, he sounds sad but full of faith that God is leading me where I need to go.

"You're a good man, Wesley Harris," he says.

"*I'm a fucking idiot*," I think. '*And I have fallen so miserably short."*

"I'm sorry," I say.

There is silence on the line. While my parents may forgive me for leaving the Society, and even be relieved, breaking the same vows to which my brother Jesuits have committed themselves means severing the link that binds us together. I worry that Tony's silence means that I have disappointed him.

"Even if you're an axe murderer in Utah, I will only love you more as a brother," he says.

Could I be more fortunate, than to count this outstanding example of a human being among my friends?

Iñigo understands that his rigorous way of life is not for everyone, and so, unlike the other religious orders who make it nearly impossible to be released from perpetual vows, Iñigo makes leaving the Society before priesthood exceptionally easy. He wants men on fire for God, not men living with regrets. When the Society grows so rapidly that Iñigo can hardly keep track of the colleges and churches and missions across the globe, he worries that too many unqualified men are being allowed into the Society. He tightens requirements for men entering the Society, demanding that they already be self-sufficient, already well-versed in living the spiritual life in the real world, so that when they are sent on assignments they will not crumble in the face of adversity.

1999. Staten Island. Having entered the Society immediately after high school, and having remained relatively sheltered throughout my seven years in it, I have to learn about the real world. Two months after I move to Staten Island, as winter begins to weaken, I buy an old mountain bike for a couple hundred dollars and ride it towards what looks, on the map, like a popular beach. I hit a few dead ends and some road construction and get turned around, and suddenly I see a sign for a Jesuit retreat house.

I haven't seen a spiritual director or gone to Mass in several months, and I think it could be time to re-establish my spirituality in the context of my new life. Some days I still wonder if I made a mistake by leaving the Jesuits. I follow the signs around neatly groomed grounds to the retreat house itself, and ask a guy who is washing a mid-sized sedan if any Jesuits are around. He invites me inside, where he introduces me to a middle-aged Jesuit priest with a slightly graying beard.

The priest lights up when I tell him I've recently left the Society and am living on Staten Island. He invites me for a walk through the grounds, and as we walk, I tell him about my last months in the Society. I explain how my friendship with a woman, a female attorney I met at a bar one night in Dallas, became a full-blown affair. I broke my vows, but the relationship helped me overcome my fear of intimacy. By carrying on a normal sexual relationship with a woman I loved and respected, the feelings of shame and self-doubt surrounding my childhood molestation diminished. The concrete experience of making love with a woman also erased most of the doubt brought on by the revelation that so many religious enter religious life to mask their homosexuality.

This priest, who nods as I tell him a brutally honest account of the last few years, says: "So, you're working in Greenwich Village. Maybe we could meet down there for coffee from time to time."

"That'd be nice," I say. "I can probably use some spiritual direction."

He leads me into the retreat house, through long hallways past nearly fifty rooms, and up a few flights of stairs to a room at the end of a hallway where he keeps a bird of some kind. He directs me to sit in a chair while he sits at the edge of a bed in what seems to be his room.

"Sleeping with Jennifer was great, once I got over the initial guilt, and it cleared up all that doubt I had back in Saint Louis."

"So, you don't want to suck my dick?"

"What? No." I change the subject, talking about some of the spiritual directors I had and how much they meant to me.

"So, there's not much of a chance you'll suck my cock this afternoon, huh?"

"No!" I say.

"No blowjobs for me today, then?"

"You know what?" I say. "Fuck this."

After I get back on my bicycle, I eventually find the beach. As I ponder the priest's sexual proposition, I shudder with disgust. Unlike sixteen years ago, I understand that he is the one who is demented, not I. I know that I have done nothing to invite his advances, and thank God that I have freed myself from living a lie, like this sick priest. And unlike sixteen years ago, when I fell victim to a pervert as a nine year-old, I know that I am now strong enough to hold my own. I want to call the New York provincial and tell him what just happened, but I don't have a phone book, or a phone, and the longer I think about it, the more I realize I've had enough of provincials and retreat houses and spiritual directors. I don't have the strength to address the pressing problems of the Church. I need to keep myself alive in New York City, find a better job and spend some time with a girlfriend in Brooklyn. Nobody else can tell me how to live my life, and the only feelings I can trust are my own.

There is a long, abandoned boardwalk, and I picture it filled with people beating the heat, girls in bikinis eating ice cream, and groups of guys trying to talk to them. I take off my shoes and climb down to the water, thanking God for all the moments of my life, even the most

unpleasant, that have made me who I am. I look forward to one day riding bikes along the beach with my future wife, and perhaps even a few kids.

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Vita

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